TWICE BURNED

A NEW ELM STREET NOVEL

FREDDY KRUEGER'S™ TALES OF TERROR

BASED ON THE CHARACTERS CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

DAVID BERGANTINO

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Annotation

DON'T PLAY WITH FIRE.

Springwood High sophomore, Colleen Martini is plagued by a recurring dream… of being burned at the stake.

When a psychic tells Colleen that she was Joan of Arc in a previous life, she begins to suspect that her history book report on the same topic is more than just a coincidence. Fueled by fear, Colleen desperately searches the library to find the truth.

Engulfed by an inferno of mysterious accidents, she soon hears a death knell summoning her.

Knowing she must solve this mystery before her fate is sealed, Colleen comes to understand that sometimes the line between truth and fiction can be deadly…

- David Bergantino
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David Bergantino
Freddy Krueger's Tales of Terror #4: Twice Burned

…and this would be dedicated to…?

OCR Mysuli: denlib@tut.by

Prologue

Welcome back, beautiful dreamer! Just doing some reading by furnace firelight — a biography of the Marquis de Sade. Remedial reading, of course, so I don't mind if you interrupt. There's nothing like a good book for passing time between murderous rampages. Don't you agree?

My children — my prey — are like books. I add a few twists and turns to sad, storybook lives before bringing them to their unexpected endings. I am a great writer. And prolific, too. Heh heh heh… Why, the boiler room is rather like a library of lost souls.

While you're here, I have a real page turner for you. Hold this book in your hands. Notice the quality of the leather cover? Human skin, specially tanned. And each dark brown letter is printed with the blood of victims from this very tale of terror!

Novel concept, don't you think?

But make sure you return this book before its due date. At this library, the fine for an overdue book is a killer!

Chapter 1

"Burn the witch! Burn her!"

Hands tore at her clothes, at her hair. She was dragged forward by the angry crowd, flung to the ground, kicked, then violently wrenched to her feet so the process could begin again. The hate in their eyes blinded them to the fact that she was not even struggling. She knew her fate. And accepted it.

A glob of wetness landed in her face. Wiping it away, she looked into the eyes of a boy who couldn't have been more than six years old. *"Witch!!!"* he screamed shrilly, and spat at her again.

She smiled at him. He's only a child, she thought. He doesn't know what he's doing. I forgive him.

"My baby!" A bedraggled middle-aged woman saw the witch's smile and pulled the boy to her. She desperately hugged the child to her chest. "The witch has cast a spell on my baby!" With that, the woman dragged the child into the roiling crowd and was gone.

She felt for the woman, and worse for the child, who would grow up learning his parents' unwarranted hate and fear. Then the thought was abruptly broken as she was yanked to her feet. Strong arms grasped her, as if she had the power to escape. As if she *wanted* to escape. Before she could get her bearings, she was lifted, spun around, and slammed up against a rough wooden stake. Her arms were pulled behind her and bound tightly by the wrists. A heavy rope was wound around her body, binding her even more securely to the post. Then, as she muttered prayers of forgiveness for her misguided murderers, she noticed the instability of the surface on which she stood. If not for the ropes, she would surely fall. She looked down, past the screaming, hateful faces, past her feet.

Books. She stood atop a mound of ancient books.

The musty smell of yellowing paper and leather rose above the stench of hysteria. The scent would have calmed her — had she needed calming. But she understood. The adults didn't understand what they were doing, any more than the boy did. But she knew. They were fulfilling a destiny assigned by a much greater power. She had seen and recognized this destiny long ago, in the many visions bestowed upon her.

Again she smiled tenderly at the crazed mob that meant to kill her. Many screamed and turned away, afraid of bewitchment. An approaching torch bearer became so frightened that he dropped the torch in the crowd, nearly setting fire to the long skirt of a nearby woman.

"Blindfold the witch!" someone screamed. "Silent she may be, but curses us with her eyes!"

With that, a sweat-soaked piece of cloth was drawn tightly over her eyes and secured by a knot behind the post. But even with the blindfold, she could see the scene quite clearly. She was being granted her final vision: her own death.

A voice shouted from the crowd. "She is powerless. Now burn the witch! *Burn her!"*

The crowd joined in, chanting, "Burn the witch! Burn the witch!"

A new torch bearer moved forward. He was bald, his face scarred and deformed. He leered with evil delight as he held the torch up for all the crowd to see. The crowd responded by chanting faster and louder. Then, turning from the mob, the hideous man threw the torch at the pile of books. With a *whoosh!* the volumes burst into flame. Half the mob began to cheer as the other half continued their chant in a feverish pitch.

"Burn the witch! Burn the witch! Burn the witch!"

Heat rose from beneath her. A thick, choking smoke billowed up from the burning books. And for the first time, she felt doubt — and with it, fear. What if she was wrong? What if this was not her destiny? The tattered remains of her dress caught fire and searing heat began to consume her legs. She struggled against her bonds, but clearly she would be dead long before the rope would burn through. She ceased struggling and accepted her fate.

From her impossible vantage point, she saw the crowd stoking the fire with more books, the deformed ringleader urging them on. The chanting subsided then, and was replace by a watchful silence. No doubt they expected more struggling, or some final, terrible curse.

But she struggled no more, and never cursed them, not even as the heat and smoke began to overwhelm her. She would not curse them. She would simply die. The torch bearer stood there, his arms crossed, waiting.

*** * ***

"Wow! Weirdo-rama!" exclaimed the pudgy, bespectacled boy sitting next to her in history class. It was toward the end of the period, and the students were allowed to converse as the teacher reviewed their report proposals. "Good thing you woke up before you died. If you had died, you wouldn't have woken up."

"Don't say that!" Colleen Martini smacked Kirk's hands. He had been drumming on her desktop for the last ten minutes.

Kirk leaned back in his chair, a snide grin on his face. "That should teach you to watch what you read before bed. What do you expect when you fall asleep in the middle of Joan of Arc's life story?" He rocked in his chair. "Do what I do. Read comic books before you go to sleep. Then, if you dream, you're a superhero or something. *That's* the way to go." Unable to contain his excess energy any longer, he began to drum his hands on his thighs.

Kirk Newman had been Colleen's buddy since homeroom in seventh grade, and she couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been nervous and fidgety. Today he seemed more agitated than usual. She suspected he was preparing to launch into one of his periodic declarations of love for her. He claimed to have a "permanent crush" on her and every six months or so, would ask her to be his girlfriend. Colleen hated when he got that way. Close as she felt to Kirk, he wasn't her type, dating-wise. And after each time she gently rejected him, their relationship would become uncomfortable for a while until he got over it. The time was ripe for him to fall in love with her again, especially now that she had begun to date Kirk's cousin, Lance Mathews. It wasn't right for Kirk to feel as competitive as he did with his cousin. After all, Lance was a freshman in college. She and Kirk were still sophomores at Springwood High School.

Colleen didn't want to talk about her dream anymore. Nor did she want Kirk to make a scene that would embarrass them both. So she quickly changed the subject by asking the topic of his report. Each student had one week to write a paper on the historical figure of his or her choice.

"Who do you think I chose?" Kirk asked. Leaning against the back of his chair with one arm, he looked off into the distance. He raised one eyebrow and narrowed his eyelids in a dreamy expression. Running his fingers slowly through his greased-back hair, he took a long, slow drag from an invisible cigarette. This he tossed away with a practiced, but still somewhat fumbling, flick. For the big finish, he favored her with a

smoldering stare that, set in his homely, doughy face, only served to make her laugh.

"Let me guess," she said between snickers. "Barney the purple dinosaur?"

Kirk snapped out of his character instantly, trying to feign hurt, but his own smile kept him from pulling it off. "No! The man, the legend… James Dean."

Colleen shook her head, laughing as Kirk repeated his pantomime. He had been obsessed with James Dean for a long time. His bedroom walls were lined with posters, and his video collection contained every movie starring, about, or containing any sort of reference to the pop icon. The whole mystique, the fast-cars-and-faster-girls image, entranced Kirk. Unfortunately, the image fit him about as well as a neon blue suit would fit a funeral. Colleen had seen *Rebel Without a Cause* and *East of Eden* — at Kirk's insistence. It had been instantly clear to her that her friend did not resemble James Dean in the slightest. Elvis in his Vegas years, maybe, but James Dean, never.

Suddenly Colleen realized he was staring at her. At first she thought he was still impersonating James Dean. But then she realized that the passion burning in her friend's eyes was his own. The time had come. He was going to ask her out. Colleen felt her face grow hot. There was an awkward silence between them. Somehow, the entire classroom became utterly quiet. Kirk appeared ready to say something, and Colleen was certain now that the whole class would hear. He took a deep breath. So did Colleen.

Then the bell rang.

Kirk snapped his mouth shut as Colleen let out all the air in her lungs in a long sigh. The history class, which had not truly been totally silent, burst into a low roar as students got up from their desks, chattering away as they began to file out the door.

"Remember!" called out Mr. Klusky, the history teacher. "These papers are due next Friday. That's a week from today for the chronologically impaired among you. And some of you will be chosen to deliver the reports orally to the class the following week, so be prepared." Many students groaned in displeasure at this unexpected added announcement.

Kirk stood quickly. The look of passion disappeared from his face. "I'll see you later at the library," he said brightly to Colleen. Then, with a wink, he darted out the door.

Colleen rose slowly as he left. "Saved by the bell," she muttered quietly to herself. She finished stuffing her books into her bag, slung it over her shoulder, and headed out of the classroom.

Wrapped in her own thoughts, Colleen didn't notice the figure that fell into step directly behind her. She did feel a little tickle on the back of her neck, just above the collar of her blouse. Reaching, back, she touched the spot lightly, never breaking her stride.

Seconds later, something sharp bit her on the neck. Colleen screamed.

Chapter 2

Colleen screamed again.

Instinctively her hands flew to her neck and her fingers closed around something hard and smooth. As she tried to pull it off her skin, it was roughly yanked from her hands. She shrieked once more, then turned quickly at the sound of laughter behind her.

"Oh, you are a Colleeny-Weenie, for sure!" taunted a coarse female voice. The voice belonged to Vicki Stratton, who was flanked, as she almost always was, by Tish Hughes and Melina Carlton.

Almost in unison, Tish and Melina repeated, "For sure." Then they giggled like schoolchildren watching a boa constrictor swallowing a rat.

Colleen gulped, and absently rubbed her sore neck. Without turning around, she was aware that many students were staring at her because she had screamed. A few of them knew that a tense scene was likely to follow.

Considered a bad egg by all of the school's faculty and most of the students, Vicki Stratton was a rotten baker's dozen as far as Colleen was concerned. She certainly looked the part, with her pointed, black boots and black jeans so tight, it looked as if Vicki had painted them on and stuck a brass button in her navel. Vicki's short, auburn hair was swept back, revealing tiny ears that had nevertheless been pierced about five times each. Tish and Melina were cheap imitations of Vicki, each of them a bad girl in training. At the moment, the baddest of the girls, Vicki, held a plastic novelty shark-on-a-stick. Manipulating the little ring at the end of the wooden dowel on which the shark head was mounted, she brandished it at Colleen. Each time Vicki pulled on the ring, plastic jaws ridged with teeth snapped inches from Colleen's face.

"Oh look," Vicki squealed, bringing a hand up to her cheek in melodramatic surprise. "I gave Colleeny-Weenie a hickey! What will her big college boyfriend say to that, I wonder?"

"Leave me alone, Vicki." Colleen knew she sounded whiny, but couldn't help it.

Vicki lowered the shark-on-a-stick and walked right up to Colleen. "Whattaya gonna do about it if I don't, huh?" Their faces were inches apart. Colleen quickly shrank away from Vicki's glowering eyes. "You know,

we're reading a book in English class about you and your boyfriend. It's called *Of Mice and Men*!" A harsh laugh escaped her. Melina and Tish tittered in the background.

Colleen just wanted to die. Then a voice spoke up.

"I wasn't aware you could read, Miss Stratton, judging from your grades in my class." Colleen looked up to see Mr. Klusky standing in the doorway of his classroom. Vicki's only response to him was a sneer. "Now, leave Ms. Martini alone and get to class."

"I'll catch you later, Colleeny-Weenie." Vicki winked and snapped the shark jaws in Colleen's face twice. Then she spun around abruptly and walked off, Melina and Tish following close behind.

The crowd immediately began to break up. Colleen looked up at Mr. Klusky and silently thanked him for his intervention.

He smiled at her sympathetically while shaking his head. "If you'd like to talk, Colleen, my next period is free."

"No, thank you," Colleen replied, feeling her face flush with embarrassment. "I have a class. But thank you."

"We wouldn't take the whole time. And I could write you a note. If you like, we could go down to the principal's office."

Colleen began to back away, stammering. "No, no. It's, uh, okay, Mr. Klusky. We don't have a problem, really. We're just two different people who rub each other the wrong way, I guess. I mean, I appreciate your concern and all, but I can take it. Really. Like you said before, I'd better get to class." Colleen turned away, mostly to escape Mr. Klusky's pitying gaze. Just as she did, the bell beginning the next class period rang.

"I'd better write you that note, at least," Mr. Klusky called after her.

Barely turning back, she called back, "I'll be okay." Then she turned the corner.

When she arrived at her math class minutes later, the look on the teacher's face made it clear she had heard about Colleen's confrontation with Vicki. Slipping silently into her chair, Colleen mouthed the word "sorry." The teacher nodded slightly, and resumed class.

Nobody really understood exactly how sorry Colleen did feel. It seemed as if Vicki was at the top of the school's food chain and she was at the bottom. *C'est la vie.* Such is life. Though actually, to Colleen, it was more like *c'est la guerre.* Such is war. Because that's how life sometimes felt.

Chapter 3

The rest of the school day went by without further incident. Colleen passed Vicki in the halls several times, but pretended the other girl didn't exist. She knew that if they locked eyes for even a moment, Vicki would try to bait her again. Her efforts were successful. Soon school was over and Colleen had made it unscathed to the Springwood Public Library to work on her history report.

Normally Colleen enjoyed going to the public library. The place had seemed ancient even when she had been a small girl. All the bookshelves were made of old mahogany, and the few walls not hidden by books were paneled in the same dark wood. Mounted on the walls were ornate light fixtures that had been converted from gas lamps and oil paintings of Springwood's founding fathers. The database terminals, which had only recently replaced the antiquated card-file system, and the barcode readers used to check out books were, along with the Touch-Tone phones, the only signs of truly modern technology.

But today Colleen found herself unable to concentrate on her work. At first she thought it was due to her run-in with Vicki. But that wasn't it at all. It was her dream. The image of being burned alive atop a pile of books kept popping into her mind. At the moment, she was surrounded by books, and that made her feel unsafe. Not even the presence of Kirk and his cousin Lance, both of whom worked at the library, made her feel any safer. At least Vicki was nowhere to be seen. But then again, Tish was here, sitting two tables down from Colleen. And where there was Tish, Vicki might not be far away.

Actually, when Vicki wasn't influencing her, Tish could be very sweet, and under other circumstances, Colleen thought that the two of them could have been friends. But mild-mannered, homely Tish held Vicki in awe. Sadly, Colleen understood. Tish was not a happy girl, and most of it stemmed, according to the prevailing rumors, from troubles at home. She apparently had an abusive father — and a mother unable or unwilling to protect herself or her daughter from his angry tirades. It was a well-known fact that Tish had run away many times to escape them both. Colleen

guessed that Tish was drawn to Vicki because she exuded a power and strength of character that her mother lacked.

Colleen sighed. Tish was so misguided. But there was nothing to be done about it. You can't change people, and people don't change, thought Colleen. *C'est la vie, c'est la guerre.*

A loud thump on her study table made her jump almost out of her chair. Colleen looked up to see Kirk, fighting back laughter. The squeak of his book cart should have warned her of his approach, but she had been too deep in thought to hear it.

"Sorry," he chuckled insincerely, "I hope you didn't wet yourself."

As was her frequent habit, Colleen blushed. "Kirk! Stop that!" she cried as loudly as she felt she could get away with in the library. Quickly she scanned the area around her to see if anyone had noticed. No one seemed to be staring at her.

"Ah, don't worry. You could scream and no one would care." As soon as he said that, Kirk's smile left his face. Sitting quickly, he pushed aside the stack of books he had dropped on the table. "Well, not no one." A strange, serious mood had suddenly come over him. He lowered his voice and looked deep into her eyes. "Look, I was wondering, would you wanna meet me at Wide Awake later for coffee or something?"

"Or something?" Colleen said suspiciously, trying to be funny. But her quip only embarrassed Kirk.

"Or steamed milk or something," he stammered defensively. "I just wanna go out with you. Just us."

Colleen let out the heaviest sigh of the day. Since history class, she had forgotten her suspicion that Kirk had a crush on her again. She barely had the energy to reply gracefully, but she tried. "I'm going out with Lance tonight, Kirk." Anger flared in Kirk's round face. He started to say something, then closed his mouth without a word.

"We go through this same routine every time," Kirk said. "I've got it memorized. I'm not your type."

"We're best friends, Kirk." Colleen hung her head for a moment. She wished there were something more she could say that would calm him down, but nothing came to her. Nothing ever did. "To be honest, I don't know what I need. I obviously like you. But I *like* like Lance. Heck, you were the one who introduced us!" Colleen immediately regretted saying

that. Stung by the reminder, Kirk stood quickly, shaking the table and nearly knocking his chair backward.

"Thanks! I needed that!"

Colleen stood. "Kirk, please…" she began, but was cut off when suddenly a gnarled hand gripped Kirk firmly by the shoulder. It was his turn to jump.

"Mr. Newman, are you finished with that cart of books I asked you to put away?" The crone who now had Kirk in her clutches was Mrs. Wodell, the head librarian. She was as old as the building itself, it was said. And she smelled at least as musty. Kirk turned to face her.

"Sorry Mrs. Wodell." His anger disappeared in an instant. A surprise appearance by Mrs. Wodell often had a sobering effect on people. "I'll get right to them." He started for the cart, but Mrs. Wodell held him in place. Her mouth widened in a disconcerting smile. As was her habit, Mrs. Wodell launched into a lecture for the benefit of both of them.

"If books are away from the shelves, Mr. Newman, it means our patrons cannot find them. And if books cannot be found, then they cannot be read. And an unread book is the saddest type of orphan!" Mrs. Wodell's bright eyes quickly darted around to see who else might have absorbed this most valuable bit of freely dispensed wisdom. Satisfied at least that Colleen had heard, she released Kirk from her claw and hobbled away.

Kirk stood still until Mrs. Wodell had disappeared into her office. At first, neither spoke. But as soon as the door closed, Kirk went first.

"Yikes." Kirk's eyes were wide with mock fear. Colleen grinned, suppressing a laugh. She didn't like to make fun of Mrs. Wodell. Certainly the woman was growing more and more dotty, and her proclamations more absurd, but the woman's advanced age should be rewarded with respect, not ridicule. Normally Kirk had plenty of pointed remarks to make about Mrs. Wodell, but this time he turned silently to the cart and started to wheel it away. "I gotta put the 'kids' to bed."

Colleen knew the pain of her rejection had returned.

"Kirk…"

He turned and looked once more at her. Sadness was set in the lines of his face. Traces of anger remained in the corners of his eyes. He shrugged. "Hey, no big deal. Another battle lost, I guess." The cart squeaked as Kirk wheeled it away.

Colleen shuddered. Kirk's response to her was different this time. Normally he'd apologize and sulk for a few days. Then he'd forgive her and return to his nervous, desperately hip self, pretending that nothing had occurred between them. Maybe the fact that she was interested in someone else this time changed things. Or maybe the fact that the other person was his cousin Lance, and that he was responsible for their meeting, made it even worse. Would he not speak to her now, or would he be mean to her? She hoped it wouldn't be the latter. Abuse from Vicki, she could take. But from a friend as close as Kirk, now, that would really hurt. She'd just have to wait and see.

* * *

Colleen turned back to her research materials for her report on Joan of Arc. It was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate, but she had to try. Going through her pile of resources, she soon realized that one book from her reading list was missing.

At a nearby database terminal, Colleen typed in the author of the book she was seeking, Milo Gabrev, then pressed Enter on the keyboard. The screen blanked out for a few seconds, except for a character in the middle representing a clock. Then the title of the book appeared in green phosphor letters. Jotting down the reference number, she took the information to Mrs. Wodell, who had emerged from her office and now sat at the librarian's desk.

"Excuse me." Colleen handed her the slip of paper with the reference number. "Can you help me find this book?"

"I'm sure I can," replied Mrs. Wodell, bestowing upon Colleen an almost beatific smile before looking at the number. She always had a smile for a library patron who needed help. She took her role at the library very seriously, and as a result, had a deep appreciation for anyone who used the library and showed an interest in books. She felt this especially with students. So many kids had been lost to video games and television that she felt it her duty to make their visit to the library a positive experience.

As the location of the book came to Mrs. Wodell, her eyebrows lowered slightly, but the smile never wavered. "This book is found in our reference section in the library basement. I'm afraid I can't show you

exactly where it is, since the stairs are steep and my bones have trouble with the four steps up to the front door of this library." Mrs. Wodell chuckled unselfconsciously.

"That's okay," Colleen said. "I'm sure I can find it."

"I can get someone else to help you, if you'd like. Your friend Kirk, for example." Then the old lady smiled knowingly. "He's a nice boy, but he gets distracted easily. If he helps you, you won't let him get distracted again, will you?" She winked good-naturedly.

Colleen knew what the librarian was thinking. "Oh, Kirk and I aren't…" she stammered, choking back ironic laughter. She looked away from the old woman's moist eyes. "Kirk and I are just friends."

"Is that so?" Mrs. Wodell asked slyly, misinterpreting Colleen's reaction as embarrassment. "Back in my day, when a boy sat that close to a girl, they were sweet on one another." Then she turned wistful. "Of course, kids today there're a lot of things they'll do together today even if they don't like each other." She sighed and there was a moment of silence. Now it was Mrs. Wodell who seemed embarrassed. "I'm sorry, young lady. You know how it is with us old folks. Don't have a lot of people to talk to, so when we see a good listener, like you seem to be, we take advantage. The only other person who listens is Denny, and of course, he doesn't have much to say." She chuckled once more. "So would you like someone to help you find the book?"

"No, thanks. I'll be okay on my own."

"Okay, then. Feel free to come back if you need any more help."

Colleen thanked her, and Mrs. Wodell went back to the paperwork on her desk. Leaving her other books at the table, Colleen walked across the library to the stairway leading to the basement. On the way she passed Kirk, with his nearly empty cart. He simply raised an eyebrow at her. Colleen froze, not knowing what to expect from him. Then Kirk smiled and gave her a smoldering James Dean look, with a wink for added effect. Colleen felt immensely relieved. He wasn't angry with her after all. Better still, he hadn't lapsed into his usual sulking either. She returned his wink with a smile and descended into the basement. The smile disappeared about three steps down.

Four more steps and the gloom of the library basement enveloped Colleen completely. The exchange with Mrs. Wodell had distracted her from the fact that the library basement was her least favorite place in the

building to go — and she wasn't alone in that regard. The basement gave almost everyone the creeps.

She stood at the bottom of the steps. A small hallway led from the bottom of the stairs to the basement's main section. The smell alone almost caused her to flee back up the stairs: mildew, old paper. Not as delicate as it was upstairs. What's more, it reminded her of the nightmare. Swallowing the lump of irrational fear that rose in her throat, she walked forward.

Old card files lined the walls. They were being saved because of their value as antiques. The deeper into the basement she walked, the more oppressive the air became. Several small, rectangular windows near the ceiling of the basement were closed and provided little light and no ventilation.

Mahogany bookcases filled the entire space, except for a «clearing» in the center, which contained a study table. No one ever studied down here — no one could, even if he or she felt the inclination. Bare incandescent bulbs shone from fixtures similar to those of the floor above. These, however, were not as elegant, nor as well maintained. The light was dim and yellow and could not reach around between most of the bookcases. Even on the brightest of days, entering a row was like walking into a dark alley late at night.

Looking at the numbered cards at the end of the first two bookcases, Colleen realized, with some distress, that her destination was toward the back of the basement. She nervously glanced down each row as she passed it. Each seemed like a musty tunnel with a sickly light at the end. As she continued, she walked faster, realizing that the sooner she found her book, the sooner she would be able to return upstairs.

As she had feared, her book was located on the bookshelf against the wall farthest from the stairs. Before she walked down the row, she glanced over her shoulder, suddenly sure that someone was behind her. But no one was there. Then she looked down the row: another tunnel. Daylight shining through the tiny window on the wall above did little to lessen the claustrophobic effect. The dark leather book covers seemed to absorb light.

Cramming down the ball of fear that threatened to rise once more, she purposefully strode down the aisle, stopping where she thought her book might be. She was close. The reference numbers and titles were hard to read in the gloom, so the activity distracted her from her fears.

It was not long before she found the book she had been looking for. It turned out to be a heavy, leather-bound volume, with gold-stamp lettering on the spine. Colleen pulled it from the shelf slowly, so as not to disturb the books around it.

Just then, she heard a noise from behind. Her fear returned, threefold. Gasping, she turned quickly. A shadow passed by in the next aisle of books. At the same time, the book she had been holding on to fell to the ground with a loud thump. This startled her, spinning her back around. Before she could react, books that had been next to hers fell out of the bookcase en masse. In the otherwise silent basement, each book sounded like a bomb when it hit the floor. Frantically Colleen reached up and stopped the rain of books. The basement became silent again.

Colleen was tempted to flee the basement, leaving her book behind. Instead, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply for a few seconds. She needed her book, and it was unlike her to leave a mess for someone else to clean up. She stooped down to organize the books that had fallen.

Her focus on the task was so intense that she did not notice a figure emerge from the shadows and glide silently toward her.

Once the books were stacked neatly, Colleen picked up as many as she could. As she stood, two scarred hands reached for the remaining books. The hideous pink and white flesh stood out against the dark, drab book covers. With a yelp of fear, Colleen fell backward, dropping her armload of books. Above her towered a ghastly figure wearing a dark jumpsuit. A thin ray of light from the window struck its face.

It was the face of the torch bearer in her dream. And he was reaching a monstrous hand toward her, the scar tissue almost glowing in the dark.

Chapter 4

Scrambling backward like a crab, Colleen tried to escape the grotesque creature reaching for her. She kicked out, and her foot connected with something solid. With a yelp like an injured dog, the specter withdrew his hands, rubbing the one that had been kicked, and began to retreat into the shadows.

Colleen suddenly realized where she was: the basement of the library, not some nightmarish town square where she was about to be burned as a witch. She closed her eyes and in a moment willed away the smothering fear and called after the creature, who was rounding the corner at the far end of the aisle.

"Denny! Wait!" The figure hesitated, then disappeared out of sight. Colleen got to her feet. "I'm sorry," she pleaded, as if speaking to a small child. "I wasn't paying attention. You startled me, that's all. It's okay. You can come over here."

Only a slight whimpering suggested that he remained just around the corner. Then, as silently as he had appeared before, Denny returned. The dim light again revealed his scarred, monstrous features, but Colleen successfully suppressed the urge to wince in disgust. Knowing that he had little use for pity, either, Colleen forced herself to just relax.

"Whew!" she laughed. "I was totally zoned. Didn't even see you there." With a casual shrug, she stooped to pick up the books that were now scattered widely over the floor. Denny, who had stopped several feet away, moved toward her again and silently began to help gather them.

Colleen looked up and smiled at Denny. As soon as she did, he averted his eyes. Denny was the Springwood equivalent of the village idiot. Mute since birth, he had been dismissed long ago as retarded. Natural parents might not have accepted that label, but Denny had no real parents of whom anyone was aware. Shuffled around from foster home to foster home, he had received only the most rudimentary education. Very early on, an apathetic social worker had deemed him capable of only the most menial labor, so he had been taught to sweep and mop and, occasionally, hammer a nail. Those small skills might have allowed Denny a reasonable existence. But then there were the hideous scars that covered much of his body.

According to the whispers among the adults, a drunk and sadistic foster father had punished Denny for some minor offense with a bath of battery acid. Despite the cruelty involved, the man responsible had gotten off lightly. After all, Denny was "only a feeb."

His appearance ruined, Denny achieved monster status in Springwood. Parents would actually use him in place of the boogeyman in bedtime stories. As a result, he was feared by young children, and taunted by the older ones. Only Mrs. Wodell had treated Denny like a human being, offering him a job as custodian at the library. At first, the so-called city fathers had protested, saying that he would scare away the children. It was hard enough to get them in the library these days. Finally Mrs. Wodell shamed them into a compromise that allowed the library to hire Denny, with the promise that he would keep mostly out of sight during business hours. Unwittingly, this only furthered Denny's reputation, for he became the rarely glimpsed fiend who lurked in the library basement.

Not long ago, Colleen had been among the fearful. She had never openly teased Denny, but she dreaded the sight of him. Then once, she had observed him hard at work, unaware of her presence. At first she had been repulsed by his appearance. But something about him made her keep watching. That's when she realized how natural and relaxed his movements were, how confident he was of his abilities — he was fixing a bookcase at the time — and just how normal he appeared. Not like a monster, but like a person. Before she realized it, she was walking toward him, to get a better view, and gave herself away. The instant Denny looked up, the moment was ruined. He retreated immediately, fear replacing the glow of satisfaction in his eyes. She had called out for him to wait, but he didn't even look back.

Colleen felt ashamed. At first she thought it was because she had spied on Denny in a private moment. But it was more than that. By his reaction, he had been anticipating mockery or disgust. It had happened to him all his life, so why should this moment be any different? He was a monster because people refused to see anything *but* a monster. And so he was instantly defensive and skittish around «normal» people. No wonder he acted in ways that reinforced the perception of those who persecuted him.

That moment had convinced Colleen that Denny deserved better. So she would do better. This encounter had been her first opportunity since then, and she had blown it badly, so far. On the other hand, the fact he had

come forward in the first place was unusual for him. Perhaps he had sensed her intentions after all.

As they replaced the last of the fallen books onto the shelf, Colleen tucked the one she had come down for under one arm and extended her other hand toward Denny.

"Thank you, Denny. I'm a klutz!" She was smiling at him, brightly and naturally. Denny looked nervously from her hand to her face. Colleen was beginning to think he wasn't so frightening after all. "Don't worry," she told him, "I don't think *either* of us bite."

A smile seemed to form on what was left of Denny's misshapen lips. Then, slowly, he reached forward to grasp her hand. Colleen braced herself, hoping that Denny wouldn't notice. She had never touched him before, and she didn't know how the scar tissue would feel. Then her hand was engulfed by his, and they shook. Actually, she thought his skin felt kind of smooth. Denny stared at their clasped hands, seemingly amazed. Suddenly fear blazed in his eyes once more and he pulled away. With one last frightened glance, he ran off, soon disappearing in the shadows. If he had stopped around the corner again, Colleen could not tell. The basement became oppressively silent once more.

Rather than push her luck, Colleen decided against calling Denny back. That's enough excitement for one day, she thought. For both of us. She caught not even a glimpse of Denny as she walked through the basement on her way back to the staircase.

Even though the main floor of the library was brighter and more cheerful than the basement, Colleen was still unable to concentrate. Stacking up her books on Joan of Arc, she decided to take them home. Perhaps she'd be more comfortable there.

Lance was manning the book checkout. Kirk's cousin was tall and thin, but not awkward. He saw her and smiled, the power of which bored a hole in her uneasiness. No wonder Kirk was jealous. Not long ago it had been unthinkable that someone as handsome as Lance would be interested in her. Not only that, he was older — eighteen to her sixteen years — and in *college*. Their relationship was still very new, but she felt it was a very special one. And she thought he felt the same way.

With a wink, Lance turned his attention back to his next customer, Tish.

"Do you have your card with you?" he asked brightly.

Tish swallowed nervously as she set her books on the counter. "Uh, no, I don't, but…"

"That's okay, just give me your name," Lance interjected.

"Tish Hughes."

After a few taps on the computer keyboard, a beep was heard.

Lance ran his finger down the display on the screen. When he finally stopped, he asked Tish, "On Elm Street, right?" Tish nodded. "Great. We're set."

Using a light pen, Lance scanned the bar code on the inside cover of the book. The computer beeped. Then twice more. Lance frowned.

"I'm sorry, the computer shows you have two dollars in late fees. I can't check out any books for you until you clear that up." Lance seemed truly sorry for the inconvenience.

"But I don't have it on me right now." A note of desperation crept into Tish's voice. She rarely had much money on her, and was ashamed of the fact. "And I have this report due for school."

"I could hold the books for you, if you like," Lance told her pleasantly.

"But if I come home without these books, my parents will think I blew off the library today. I told them I was coming here. My father will be very angry if he thinks I lied." Tish was on the verge of tears. "Couldn't you make an exception? I'll bring the money in tomorrow. I swear!"

Lance considered it for only a moment. And like the gentleman that he was, started scanning the rest of Tish's books. He slyly blinked both eyes at her. "I think that'll be okay." And then he smiled at Tish — and for a moment, Colleen felt a twinge of jealousy. The feeling passed when she realized Lance was doing what came naturally to him, being an awesomely nice guy.

"Thank you," sniffed Tish. Unfortunately, her relief lasted only about a second.

"Excuse me, young lady, but all we can do is hold your books for you." Mrs. Wodell had appeared and towered over Tish from behind the counter. Lance immediately froze.

"But like I said," Tish protested, "I can't go home without my books, I can't."

"Well, if you had brought your previous books back in a timely manner, you would now be able to check these out in a timely manner." Mrs. Wodell crossed her arms and glowered at Tish, who burst into tears

and fled the library. Colleen's eyes were locked on Mrs. Wodell as she turned her gaze on Lance. Instantly her expression softened. "Put those books aside for when the girl comes back."

Lance nodded quickly and began to gather the books.

"I appreciate your sense of chivalry, Mr. Mathews," Mrs. Wodell continued. "But a certain sense of responsibility must be instilled in these young people." Then she stopped, waiting for a reply from Lance.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered dutifully.

Mrs. Wodell's expectant look melted into a satisfied smile. She started to turn away when the front door to the library banged open. Tish had returned, urged forward by Vicki and Melina. Both Tish and Vicki had red faces, Tish from embarrassment and Vicki from rage.

"Go ahead," Vicki ordered Tish, and then pushed her toward the counter. Mrs. Wodell's eyebrows went up in bemusement.

"May I?" Tish asked Colleen in a pathetically small voice. Colleen nodded, allowing Tish to walk in front of her in line. She held up two dollars to Lance. "My friends loaned me the money. Can I get my books now?"

Lance looked from Tish to Mrs. Wodell. "And your library card?" asked Mrs. Wodell scornfully. Tish burst into deep sobs once more.

Fuming, Vicki approached the counter. "She told your boy here she don't have it, you old witch!" Vicki's regular speaking voice seemed like shouting in the library. Other customers were starting to look. "It got stolen, along with her driver's license and some other things when she was here a few weeks ago. Probably your Mongoloid pervert janitor did it!"

"Young lady!" Mrs. Wodell was indignant. "I'll not have you speak of my employees in that manner. Leave here at once."

"Oh, why don't you just drop dead, lady!" Vicki spat back at her. Mrs. Wodell blinked as if she had been slapped. "Tish don't need the card, and you know it. Or are you gonna make her fail her class?"

"I would do no such thing." Fiercely Mrs. Wodell turned to Lance, who obeyed instantly. "Give this girl her books!" Then she leaned forward on the counter toward Vicki. "You, young lady — and I use the term quite insincerely — need to show some respect. Until you do, you are banned from entering this library. If I see you, I will have Denny throw you off the premises."

Vicki shrugged off the threat. "I got the books I needed earlier today. Guess I won't be able to return them now, huh?" By now, a shell-shocked Tish had rejoined her friends.

"Can we please leave now?" she whispered shakily.

"Sure, let's go." With a sneer, Vicki turned and the group began to leave. At the door, she turned back toward the counter.

"And don't think I didn't see ya there, Colleeny-Weenie. I'll *definitely* catch you later. Lance, always a pleasure." Then, with a sexy purse of her lips, she said, *"Woof!"* To Mrs. Wodell, she smiled harshly. "And as for you, have a nice heart attack, ya old biddy!" The three were gone a moment later.

Tough as she was, the encounter left Mrs. Wodell a bit flustered. "If you see any of them, especially the sharp-tongued girl, *I* want to know about it, is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Lance told her promptly. Still agitated, Mrs. Wodell went to her office. She closed the door behind her with a restrained but unmistakable slam.

Kirk rushed up to the counter just as Lance began to check out Colleen's books.

"What da hell was that?" he asked breathlessly.

"Clash of the titans, cuz."

"I've never seen Mrs. Wodell that upset. I guess she has a pulse after all!" Kirk chuckled to himself. Colleen batted him on the shoulder with a book.

"Kirk! What if she hears you? Don't you think she's put up with enough already?"

"Colleen's right, cuz. Cut the woman some slack, okay?"

The glee left Kirk's face. "You guys are no fun," was all he could say, and he went back to work nearby.

After Kirk left, Lance gave Colleen a special smile. "I'm off at nine p.m., beautiful. We still on for dinner and whatever?"

Colleen giggled. "What is it with you and your cousin and your 'whatevers' and 'somethings'?" Lance didn't have the slightest clue what she was talking about. "Never mind," she answered his curious look. "I'm sure whatever with you will be fun."

"Great! I'll pick you up around nine-fifteen, nine-thirty."

"See ya then!" She blew a quick kiss to him, wrapped her arms around her stack of books, and left the library. Whistling as she walked, Colleen

had forgotten all about her earlier experience in the basement.

And she was totally unaware of being watched as she got into her mother's car and drove home.

Chapter 5

Lance got out of work on time, and by nine-thirty, he and Colleen had arrived at the Jaguar diner in his beat-up Datsun. It certainly wasn't as nice as the car Colleen's mother let her borrow — a brand-new Buick — but it was his, and that made it the best car around as far as Colleen was concerned.

As she climbed out of the car, Colleen looked up at the buzzing sound coming from overhead. It was the diner's sign: a glowing jaguar leaping from a running position in four neon outlines that flashed in succession like an animated cartoon. Colleen had always thought a pouncing jaguar was a strange mascot for a diner, kind of morbid. But no one else complained. One time she had mentioned her feeling to Kirk, who just looked at the sign and shrugged. "I think it's cool!" he replied, and Colleen never mentioned it to anyone again. I guess it makes sense, Colleen thought now. The jaguar was catching food, and that's what the people inside do: eat. But it sure is strange.

Inside the diner, Lance and Colleen were seated immediately at a booth. Their waitress, a girl about Lance's age named Wendy, gave them menus. And for Lance, she had a lascivious smile.

"Hi, Lance; who's your friend?" Wendy didn't even glance at Colleen as she spoke.

"This is Colleen," Lance replied, ignoring the way she seemed to be coming on to him. Even then, her eyes remained glued to him. Colleen didn't bother to say hello.

"Nice," Wendy said about no one, to no one. Then there was a pause as she looked Lance over, head to toe. She laughed for no apparent reason. "Oh, anyway. I'll be back in a minute to take your order."

Lance thanked her. After giving him another once-over, Wendy left.

As soon as she was gone, Colleen felt jealous. Lance saw her distress and spoke up quickly.

"Don't worry about her," he said, taking her hand in his. "She's just some sorority girl from college who's after me. I forgot she worked here."

"Are you in a fraternity?" Colleen asked him. They hadn't known each other very long. All she really did know was that he went to the local

community college, that his cousin Kirk had just gotten him a job at the library, and that he seemed to be the nicest boy she had ever met. But there was so much she didn't know.

"Nah," he replied to her question. "I'm not a frat guy, except for one thing."

"What's that? Sorority girls?" Lance laughed; he thought she was making a joke.

"No, that's not it at all. It's the parties. They have some pretty killer ones on campus. I know some guys in the fraternities. They invite me, everything's paid for, you meet a lot of people and just have fun."

"Sounds great." Colleen tried to sound enthusiastic, but couldn't help realizing that some of the «people» he met and had «fun» with must be girls like Wendy.

"Ah, you know," he said, sensing her questions. "You meet all kinds. Some are *not* your kind." He nodded in the direction of the diner's kitchen, indicating Wendy. "And some, that you don't even meet at parties like that, *are* your kind." With that, he squeezed her hand and smiled. Colleen's fears evaporated. "Now, I need a burger. What are you having?"

Colleen looked down at her menu for the First time. When Wendy arrived a minute later, Colleen was ready to order a Caesar salad. But the waitress nearly walked away after taking Lance's order. He stopped Wendy, who apologized for being "a ditz," and took Colleen's order. Colleen's stomach tightened. She didn't like this girl one bit. Luckily, Lance sensed her discomfort and, in his most charming fashion, told Wendy to bug off when she brought their food. She didn't bother them the rest of the meal.

But then again, Colleen and Lance never quite finished their meal.

Colleen had made it through nearly half her salad, and Lance had finished most of his burger.

"See, I want to get into medical school," he was telling her. "But for a good one, I really need a good undergrad program, and Springwood Community College just doesn't have it."

"Then transfer to a university," Colleen told him, aware that she was suggesting the obvious.

"I wish. But money's kinda tight right now. That's why I'm living at home and working at the library. I'm saving up, but I need good grades. I know I can get the grades. It's the money I'm worried about. The rate I'm

going, I may need a scholarship to get what I really want, and there's no guarantee, no matter how well I do, that I can get one. They're tough."

"You can do it, Lance." And then Colleen did something unprecedented: She put her hand on Lance's. She almost pulled it back when she realized it was there, but by then, he had clasped her hand in both of his.

"Thanks," he said quietly, and instead of speaking more, simply gazed into her eyes.

And Colleen thought that maybe, just maybe, she was falling in love.

Then she felt the sharp sting on the back of her neck.

"Oww!" Colleen cried. Then it happened again. Behind her, she heard a familiar, cruel laugh. Colleen turned in her seat and saw the terrible trio: Vicki, Melina, and Tish.

"Heya, Weenie!" Vicki said as she walked by. In one hand she held a straw from which she had shot spitballs at Colleen. Vicki stood at the end of the table while Melina crawled into the booth behind Lance. Tish sat across from Melina, apparently not very enthusiastic about this current round of mischief. Vicki clucked her tongue at Lance and declared, "You are, like, the hottest thing. What's a fine cat like you doing with a mouse like this?"

"Will you stop picking on Colleen already?" Lance warned Vicki.

"Really, now," Melina purred into Lance's left ear. "Are you just practicing? Because when you're through with the girly-girl, you got three" — Melina glanced back at Tish, who seemed reluctant to tease the guy who had been so nice to her earlier that day — "make that two and a half — women who'd like to know what you learned."

"That's gross, Melina," Tish mumbled. Melina looked back in shock.

"Shut up, Tish," Vicki snapped, then turned to Colleen. "See, weenie? That took guts. Thought I'd tell ya 'cause you don't seem to have any. You think this college boy needs a high school mouse like you? You're not *even* a footnote in his book of love!" Vicki snickered at her little joke. Melina snorted appreciatively. "Whataya think about that, Weenie mouse?" Vicki had leaned all the way into Colleen's face.

"Okay, that's enough." Lance was angry now and tried to pull Vicki back. She shrugged him off.

"I'm talking to the mouse here," she told him curtly, and turned back to Colleen. "So, got anything to say to me?"

Colleen felt herself trembling. Her face was flushed and hot. Vicki's leering grin was only inches away, and Colleen could feel the warmth of her breath. Colleen said the first words that came to mind:

"I forgive you, Vicki."

There was a beat of silence. Then, without warning, Vicki and Melina burst into hysterical laughter simultaneously. Tish just looked perplexed. Tears began to stream down Colleen's face.

"You forgive me?" Vicki shrieked. Other diners looked their way. *"You* forgive me?" Behind Lance, Melina put her head down on the table in hysterics. One hand pounded the surface uncontrollably.

Lance had recovered and stood angrily.

"C'mon, Colleen." He practically dragged Colleen out of the booth, threw a ten-dollar bill at the cashier as they passed the counter, and left the diner. In minutes, they were miles away. Neither had said a word. Colleen wished Lance would talk, because she wanted desperately to erase Vicki's laughter, which was still ringing in her ears.

*** * ***

Lance parked the car near the entrance of Springwood Park.

"Why did you bring us here?" Colleen ventured to ask when Lance didn't volunteer an explanation.

"I thought maybe we'd take a walk." Lance got out of the car. Colleen followed suit — but reluctantly. Lance's face appeared over the roof. His warm smile had returned. "It's a nice night."

He was right. The night was pleasant, with a warm breeze. But he was talking about going down into the park.

"Didn't they close it after dark or something? After that girl got killed?" Colleen remembered that, not long ago, a girl's body had been discovered just below the jogging path. What she didn't remember was how the girl had died. Whatever had happened, it had been murder, and Colleen had avoided the park ever since. "I don't know, Lance."

He rounded the car and quickly put his arm around her. "It'll be okay. The park was out-and-out closed for a while after that incident, but it's open now. At least until eleven."

"It must be way past that now," Colleen said hopefully as Lance guided her down the path into the park. Lance held his watch up for her to see. It read 10:20 P. M.

"See, lots of time. Tonight has only *seemed* like forever. Let's walk, huh?"

Colleen gave in. She really had no reason to resist. Besides, she was alone with Lance. "You'll protect me, won't you?"

Lance laughed. "Of course. Not a squirrel alive that would tangle with me!" This got Colleen laughing, and soon they were deep in the park.

At first they did not speak, and simply enjoyed the night air. Antique-style lampposts stood every ten paces or so, brightly lighting the area. The smell of green plants and flowers surrounded them. Colleen found it hard to believe that death had ever visited this living place.

Then, somewhere in the distance, she heard a car door slam. All at once, Colleen noticed all the dark places behind the bushes, obscured by trees and beyond the reach of the lamplight.

"Did you hear that?" Colleen asked, pulling herself closer to Lance. He looked at her with a relaxed smile.

"Nah, didn't hear a thing. Still skittish after your latest run-in with Vicki?"

"Maybe."

Lanced stopped, bringing Colleen to a halt in front of him. He looked into her eyes with deep concern.

"You really should learn to stick up for yourself," he said gently. "You shouldn't let anyone walk all over you like that."

"Oh, Vicki doesn't really bother me," Colleen said.

Somewhere behind them, a bush rustled.

Lance held her hand, laughing. "Oh, and I suppose those tears coming out of your eyes were because of the onions in my hamburger?"

At first, Colleen didn't know what to say. No one ever seemed to understand her point of view. But Lance was new to her, and she to him, so he deserved at least a chance to understand.

"Yes, she upsets me at the moment." Colleen shrugged. "But she's just the way she is. There's nothing I can do to change her. That's why I forgave her."

A twig snapped nearby, but Lance did not seem to notice.

"Maybe, but she doesn't have to be mean to you, and you don't have to let her. Tell her to peddle her wares elsewhere!" Lance's eyes wanted her to laugh, so she did.

"But if I fight her off, she'll go tease someone else. If I can take it, it might as well be me."

Lance pretended to stick his finger down his throat and made gagging noises. "Oh please. I think you've been reading too many books about Joan of Arc. She was a martyr. You don't have to be."

"I've really barely read anything yet. Just enough to know I admire her. You know, she was younger that me when she died?"

"I know." By his tone of voice, Colleen could tell Lance was disappointed by her replies. After a thought, he tried to make light of the situation. "If she had stuck up for herself, she might have lived long enough to meet a nice guy, have some fun, and find out there's more to life than giving in to bullies — or angry villagers with too much time and fire on their hands."

Again Colleen laughed, but this time an image of the final moments of her dream flashed in her head, pinching it off. Lance immediately became serious.

"All I'm saying is, you deserve better than that."

They walked a few more minutes in silence. Silence, that is, except for the snapping of twigs that seemed to come more frequently. And the sounds were getting closer. Colleen stopped abruptly and turned.

"Did you hear that? Those sounds?"

"It's nothing," he said.

"I don't know, Lance. I'd swear we're being followed."

"It's just the squirrels, Colleen. Here, I'll show you." Lance dragged Colleen to the edge of the light. Nothing could be seen in the darkness beyond. "I'll scatter those critters." He winked at her and shouted into the bushes, "Boo!"

Silence was the only response.

"C'mon, let's head back to the car," he said, and they began to retrace their steps.

After a few seconds, another crackling sound came from behind them. Colleen willed herself not to turn around.

Just then, a cry like that of a wounded beast rose, right behind them. Lance spun around and a blur of motion knocked him off his feet.

At the same time, a second, darker shape emerged from the bushes and descended upon Colleen.

Chapter 6

Both the black-clothed figure and the one struggling with Lance burst into laughter at the same time.

"Kirk!" Lance yelled. "You jerk!" With that, he threw his cousin off him onto the pathway and scrambled to his feet.

"Ow!" Kirk cried. "You didn't have to be so rough!" he said, and rubbed his arm.

Colleen finally got a look at Kirk's accomplice, whom she recognized as Ricky Santana. His skin was the cadaverous shade of someone who didn't get outside very much, except maybe at night. This was because he spent all his free time in the dark watching horror movies. One day he hoped to write and direct the ultimate horror movie, and until then, he was cultivating a perfectly creepy image.

"Hi, Colleen," Ricky said casually as he went to pull Kirk to his feet.

Lance appeared at Colleen's side, still breathing hard from the scare. Now standing, Kirk started laughing again.

"Man oh man, you should have seen you two. Priceless! Absolutely!" He and Ricky burst out laughing. Lance, however, was not amused. He rushed Kirk and pushed him into Ricky.

"What's your problem, pudgy?" The remark stung Kirk. Ricky stopped laughing.

"Cool out, Lance. It was just a joke. You know, like when you'd come and visit and we'd spend all day scaring my mom."

"We were eight then," Lance growled. "Now, grow up. I don't appreciate being spied on!" He turned to Colleen. "Let's get away from these kids." He took her hand and began to march off.

"Look at the big college stud!" Kirk yelled after them. "Afraid of a little scare!"

Lance ignored the taunts as they walked back to his car.

* * *

Kirk hung his head when he heard Lance's car pull away. Ricky clapped him on the back.

"Aw, cheer up," he told his friend. "All is not lost."

"But I really like her, Ricky. I'm serious. She's my best friend in the world."

"Oh, and what am I, chopped liver?" Ricky crossed his arms and tapped his foot indignantly.

"Get outta here. I don't want to marry you."

"I guess I better return the dress, huh?"

"Stop that! You're not helping!" Sometimes his friend Ricky could be such a pain.

Ricky managed a straight face and tried to be supportive. "Look, this is just like a movie. You've experienced two out of the three classic stages of a situation like this."

"Which are?"

"Boy meets girl. You and Colleen got that out of the way years ago. You are currently in the boy-loses-girl stage." His sly grin returned. "And may I add, you've done a great job at that."

"Look, you want me to sock you one?" Kirk balled his fists threateningly.

"Jeez, you're touchy," Ricky replied, rolling his eyes and taking a step backward. "Anyway, there's plenty of time for the boy-gets-girl stage."

"Yeah, but how's that gonna happen? Before, when there was no competition, she still didn't go for me. Now she's dating Lance." Kirk hung his head once more, but his fists were still balled. In a low voice he declared, "I hate him!"

Ricky shook his head. "Now, now. There's no use letting emotion get in the way of matters of the heart."

"So what do I do?" Even though Ricky was a pain, he was smart, and Kirk had the feeling that Ricky was about to be a big help indeed.

"Well, let me give it some thought, but for one, mellow out. Don't compete."

"If I don't do anything, where will that get me?"

"I didn't say don't do anything," Ricky said, frustrated that he'd have to explain. "Let me put it this way. Do you think our little stunt tonight is going to endear you to Colleen? I think not." Kirk reluctantly agreed.

"Remember, a person's only truly formidable opponent is himself." Ricky smiled, basking in the glow of his own wisdom.

As they started back down the path, Kirk just had to ask, "Where did you get that one, Ricky?"

"Oh, it just came to me." The smile still played on his lips. Then he shrugged. "Then again, maybe I heard it in a movie or read it in a book. I don't remember."

* * *

After a few minutes of driving in silence, Colleen finally spoke. "Don't be too mad at Kirk. You know what he's going through."

"Yeah, I know. But someone coulda gotten hurt." Lance shook his head in frustration. "He really has to just grow up and deal."

"I'm sure he will, eventually."

Lance chuckled. "I dunno. As long as I've known him, dealing hasn't been one of his strong points." He threw his hands up, momentarily taking them off the wheel. Colleen's breath caught, but he didn't notice. "You mind if I take you home now? It's getting late."

Colleen didn't mind at all. The sooner tomorrow came, the happier she'd be. Then she'd try to have a normal day.

At Colleen's house, Lance walked her to the door and kissed her good night. It took her breath away as much now as it had the first time. Inside, Colleen watched through the living room window as his car pulled out of the driveway. When he was gone, she walked quietly up to her room and prepared for bed.

As she wrapped herself in her covers, she wondered what kind of dreams the events of the day would inspire. Would she dream of Lance? Or would she dream of books and fire and monsters?

* * *

About the time Colleen was drifting off to sleep, Mrs. Wodell was just finishing a cup of hot tea. She was dressed in her favorite, flowered housecoat, but the bright daisies that decorated it were in dramatic contrast

to Mrs. Wodell's dark mood. The scene in the library with that horrid girl kept replaying in her mind.

To be fair, it wasn't even just Vicki Stratton. Most of the children nowadays had a disrespectful streak in them. Not that nice girl Colleen Martini, of course. Or the new employee, Lance Mathews. It was hard to believe such a nice boy was related to Kirk Newman. Of course, Kirk wasn't so bad, in the scheme of things. He was just mischievous, all in the name of trying too hard to be something he wasn't. She could forgive him. But Vicki Stratton and the others, she could not. And it seemed their legions were growing daily.

No respect, she thought. Girls in my day didn't dress like that unless they were prostitutes. Not even the slightest sense of decorum or responsibility.

Maybe I'm too old for this, Mrs. Wodell thought as she rinsed her teacup and put it in the sink. Maybe it would be nice to just go to the library to read and enjoy. She did enjoy her books; they truly were her children. And unlike the real children in the library, they never misbehaved. Oh, a writer would put in a naughty word now and then, but it wasn't the book's fault. And besides, naughty words didn't offend Mrs. Wodell. She'd heard them used plenty of times by real people. All kinds of people talked like that all the time when they thought no one was listening. As long as that kind of language wasn't directed toward Mrs. Wodell, that was just fine with her.

Turning on the light by her bedside, she picked up the thick volume of short stories that lay on the nightstand. It was unthinkable that Mrs. Wodell would even try to sleep without reading first. Opening to the page marked by an elegant leather bookmark, Mrs. Wodell settled into the pillows she had propped up behind her.

A contented smile formed on the lips of Mrs. Wodell's crinkled, paper-white face. Her breathing was strong and steady. Less than an hour later, she was reading the words "The End," finishing a story. But as she turned to begin the next, her contented smile suddenly twisted into a hideous snarl. The book dropped to the floor beside her bed. Involuntarily Mrs. Wodell's eyes crossed Panic gripped her, and she tried to scream. But she could not. Mercifully, she blacked out just as her thoughts turned traitor, becoming an agonizing, unintelligible secret code.

Chapter 7

Around noon the next day, the phone rang at Colleen's house. Barely shifting her attention from her research materials, she picked up the receiver.

"Yeah?" she asked absently.

"Hola! It's me," said Kirk in a rush. Colleen tensed. "Look, I'm at the library, and I can't talk long. Mrs. Wodell's in the hospital with a stroke."

"Oh my God!"

"Totally," Kirk continued, his voice all excitement and little sympathy. "She didn't show up for work this morning, and you know how she is. A house would have to fall on her to keep her away from this place."

"Kirk…!" He never let up, Colleen thought angrily.

"Just listen," he told her quickly, his tone now softened a bit. "After she didn't show up, and we call and call and she doesn't answer her phone, Denny goes over there. Takes the bus, even! Then he takes the bus all the way back and runs into the library like a madman! Scared the hell out of a few people checking out books. So he grabs Lance, who figures out — smart guy that he is — that something's wrong and drives back to Mrs. Wodell's house with Denny. When they get there, Denny points through the window, and they can see Mrs. Wodell lying in her bed, all twisted in her sheets like a…" He was about to rattle off another barb, but thought better of it. "Anyway, they break into her house, find that she's unconscious, and call 9-1-1. Lance just called from the hospital to tell me about the stroke."

"That's terrible." Colleen felt sick, recalling how Vicki had cursed at Mrs. Wodell the day before.

"Yeah, it is pretty awful." For the first time, Kirk seemed sincerely troubled by the news. "Anyway… that's not the only reason I called."

Colleen was instantly suspicious. "I thought you couldn't talk long."

"I can't. With Lance at the hospital, the only other person here besides me is the part-time librarian, Mrs. Cosgrove. And I'm not being mean when I say she's dottier than Mrs. Wodell." He wasn't just being mean. Even Colleen knew about Mrs. Cosgrove. "So I better get back before someone needs a book checked out and she has a fit over the computer. But besides

news about Mrs. Wodell, I wanted to apologize for last night. I guess I was upset and acted like a kid having a tantrum."

His apology was sweet and sincere. "It's all right, Kirk. I understand."

"Thanks. But that doesn't make it right. Ricky said something to me that made some sense. I keep that up, and I could lose you as a friend. And what would that get me? I don't want to do that." Colleen was deeply touched. "So I'd like to make it up to you. Ricky's helping me and we've got a surprise for tonight. Will you come? With Lance, of course. It'll be the four of us."

"What's the plan?"

A laugh escaped Kirk. "You dope! It's a surprise. All you need to do is be ready when we pick you up around seven-thirty. Okay?"

"Sure. If it's okay with Lance."

"I'll hit 'im up when he gets back from the hospital. This'll be fun."

By the excitement in his voice, whatever he had planned *did* sound like fun. And Colleen wanted to give Kirk a chance to make amends. It wasn't often that someone offered.

"Okay, great."

"Excellent!" Kirk nearly shouted. "I better go. I hear the computer beeping like Mrs. Cosgrove is torturing it. Gotta swoop to the rescue now. 'Bye!"

Kirk hung up and Colleen smiled. Things were going to work out with Kirk after all. What a relief! Turning back to her books, Colleen didn't look up again until her mother called her for dinner.

*** * ***

A car horn honked in front of Colleen's house at exactly seven-thirty. Colleen pulled on a jean jacket and ran out to Kirk's car. He drove a convertible Mustang. The car wasn't the Porsche Spyder that his idol, James Dean, had driven, but was sporty enough to fit Kirk's would-be hip image. If only he didn't look so out of place behind the wheel. Oh well, thought Colleen.

Taking advantage of the warm night air, Kirk had taken the Mustang's top down. Ricky sat in the passenger seat, Lance in the back.

"Hop in!" Kirk told her. He preferred that passengers leap into his car instead of using the door. To him, that was the pinnacle of cool. Before Colleen could argue, Lance put his arms around her and lifted her into the backseat with him.

"Hey!" she cried, giggling at the same time. Lance kept one arm around her after she was finally sitting. She snuggled against it.

"You looked like you needed a little help with your hop," he told her.

"Well, thank you," she told him. "You've made me very *hoppy*!" Everyone in the car groaned. Kirk put the car in gear and drove away. "So where are we going?"

"You'll see when we get there," Kirk said mysteriously. He and Ricky exchange a conspiratorial wink.

Colleen turned to Lance.

"Don't look at me, I don't know. Hey, did you hear about Mrs. Wodell?"

"Oh yeah!" Colleen had nearly forgotten. "How is she doing?"

"Not so bad, luckily. Do you know the story about how Denny found her and all that?" Colleen nodded. "She's in the hospital right now. She had a stroke, but not as bad as they first thought. Anyway, she'll be going home tomorrow. They're just keeping her there today while arrangements are being made for her at home. Someone will be there during the day to cook for her and care for her. And Denny's going to move into a spare room, make sure she'll be all right overnight." Then Lance looked like the cat who ate the canary. "And that's not all."

"What?" Lance looked ready to bust.

"I've volunteered to come in evenings to help with Mrs. Wodell's therapy and read to her before bed." Despite his obvious pride, Lance still managed to remain humble.

"Nurse Mathews to the rescue!" Kirk cracked from the front seat.

Ricky snickered and adopted a voice like an old-time radio announcer. "Beware villains! For he wields the mighty, magic bedpan!" Kirk gave his friend a high five as they both burst into new laughter. Lance tried to ignore them.

"I just thought it made sense for everyone. It'll save Mrs. Wodell money on home care, and it'll be good practice for me for med school. On Monday I'm gonna try to see if I can get some school credit for it."

Ricky was not done ragging on Lance. "Aren't we the paragon of altruism?" he said sarcastically.

"Shut up, Ricky!" Colleen swatted him on the back of the head. "Lance would do it anyway. But I bet you wouldn't volunteer to do it in any case."

Ricky twisted around in his seat to face them. He looked wounded. "Of course I would. Lancelot just beat me to it, is all."

"Yeah right." Lance was thoroughly unconvinced. "You kidding? Alone in that house with a gibbering, drooling stroke victim" — he held his hands up to his face, mimicking a palsied crone — "and an acid-scarred demon from the depths?" For this he glowered menacingly. "Heck, that's right up my alley!"

"Ricky, you're heartless."

He blew her a kiss. "I do my best."

Colleen ducked so the imaginary kiss would miss her and fly out the back of the car.

"Hey, Kirk, where are you taking us, anyway?" Lance's voice had changed. He sounded extremely wary.

All at once, Colleen realized the air had changed. It was still warm, but the scent of sulfur was in the air. Even though they were driving over fifty miles an hour, only the faintest breeze blew through her hair. Colleen looked around. Kirk had driven out of the city. Gas jets from ancient steel mills lit the sky in the distance. Colleen had the vague sensation that she and Lance were being kidnapped.

"Uh, Kirk…?" She let the question hang.

"Don't worry, kiddos. We're perfectly safe. And almost there."

Ricky pointed forward, toward a pulsating red and blue glow just ahead on the two-lane highway on which they traveled. "Up there on the right, Kirk."

"I see it, pal."

Lance and Colleen exchanged a questioning look. Somehow, this was shaping up to be not as pleasant a surprise as Colleen had expected. She forced herself to relax. Kirk deserved her faith.

Reaching the blue and red lights, Kirk pulled off the road. Dust billowed under the car from the gravel parking area they entered. The light came from a faltering neon sign above a ramshackle house. As they pulled to a stop, it seemed more like a hut. Shutters hung at odd angles to windows. Tattered lace hung over them on the inside. Arcane symbols

decorated the peeling, painted exterior. A sickly yellow lightbulb barely illuminated a porch that seemed unsafe to stand upon.

"Where are we?" Colleen asked, her voice trembling slightly.

"Can'tcha read the sign?" Kirk replied, pointing to the neon lights.

The sign read: **Fortunes Told**.

"This is our surprise?" Lance asked dubiously.

Before Kirk could reply, Ricky asked Lance, "Ever been to a psychic?"

"Nope." Lance shook his head.

"Well, surprise!" Kirk shouted, as if Lance and Colleen had walked into a secret party.

"I don't know…" Lance seemed ready to leave. That would have been fine with Colleen. The whole place looked more than a little creepy. Ricky read Lance's expression and sprang into action.

"C'mon, Lance, be a sport. It can't hurt ya. I've been to this woman, Madame Xaviera." He spoke her name with a fake Hungarian accent. "She's a trip. This'll be fun, I swear."

Lance wavered for a moment. Then he looked at Colleen to see what she was thinking. She nodded slightly, showing that, nervous or not, she was game.

"Okay. Fine."

"Yes!" barked Kirk. Then he winked at Ricky, told everyone to follow him, and started for the rickety porch.

"Couldn't you have just bought us cappuccino at the coffeehouse?" Lance asked as Kirk opened the screen door. He almost ripped it off the one hinge by which it was hung.

Kirk laughed as he pushed the inner door open and they entered Madame Xaviera's domain.

Chapter 8

The run-down exterior of the fortune-teller's building did not prepare them for what lay inside. The waiting room was small, but lush. A purple-upholstered couch with overstuffed cushions sat to the left of the entrance. On top of an elegant glass coffee table, a crystal wizard flung his delicate hands to the sky in a gesture of conjuring. Lithographs of occult scenes — effectively moody — hung on walls papered in a gold foil.

Opposite the entrance was a doorway covered with a beaded curtain. Next to that was a small wooden desk, at which sat a young Indian woman. Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun, accentuating the length of her slender, brown neck. Crystals dangled and glittered from her earlobes. Her dark eyes flared mysteriously at the sight of Ricky and Kirk. She stood and uttered a single word in a deep, clear voice:

"Yes?"

Ricky approached her. "We have an appointment to see Madame Xaviera."

The woman studied him, her eyes flaring dramatically once more. For a moment she said nothing. Then:

"Yes. One moment." In one slow, graceful movement, she parted the curtain of beads with her tiny hands and disappeared through them.

Kirk smiled at Lance and Colleen, who now sat on the couch. "Well, whattaya think so far?"

"Spooky," Lance told him.

"Mmmm-hmmm," Colleen agreed with a nod.

Kirk was pleased with their reactions. "I know. Isn't it great?" Both Colleen and Lance could only chuckle at Kirk's obvious excitement.

"I'm here all the time," Ricky said, trying to impress the others. Then, in a loud whisper, added, "They love me here."

Just as he said that, the Indian woman appeared again. There was no doubt she had heard Ricky's boast.

"Madame Xaviera will see you now," she announced. With one delicate hand, she drew the beaded curtain to one side and motioned for them to enter. Kirk, Lance, and Colleen stood and walked toward the

curtain. Kirk entered first, followed by Lance. As Colleen walked into the back room, she heard Ricky's voice behind her, in a hushed tone.

"Uh, excuse me?"

Colleen stopped and turned, thinking he had addressed her. Instead, she saw he was speaking to the Indian woman. In one hand he held up what appeared to be a fluorescent pink business card. The Indian woman nodded almost imperceptibly and took it from him. After clicking it twice with a hole punch, she handed the card back. Ricky thanked the woman, and stuck the card into his pocket. Before it disappeared, Colleen glimpsed an occult symbol and the words **12th visit free!** Ricky caught Colleen watching and smiled sheepishly at her. Colleen raised an eyebrow, then continued through the doorway, with Ricky close behind.

This new room was as plain as the front room was elegant. In the center was a round wooden table surrounded by five chairs. Four were simple wood chairs that matched the table. One was a thronelike, cushioned chair. The fabric of its cover matched the plush purple couch. Toward the back of the room sat a dresser, the top of which was littered with a variety of fortune-telling tools, among them tarot cards, rune stones, and a crystal ball. Against the back wall was yet another doorway, this one with an actual door rather than beads. The room was utterly windowless. This made Colleen feel somewhat claustrophobic.

The group approached the table and stood around it, uncertain of what to do next. The beads clicked once more and the Indian woman spoke one last time. "Sit, please."

Colleen sat to the right of the oversized chair, which was undoubtedly meant for Madame Xaviera. Next to her sat Lance. Kirk sat on the other side of the fortuneteller's chair, and Ricky took the remaining wooden seat. As soon as they were seated, the overhead light from the candelabra fixture above the table dimmed slightly. Expectant silence descended upon the room.

Kirk opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by a sound that came from behind them. Looking toward the rear door, they saw its doorknob turn slowly. Kirk made a gulping sound in his throat for comic effect and Ricky hit him.

The door swung open. Madame Xaviera stepped into the room.

"Good evening," she said brightly, in a light European accent. Her exact age was impossible to tell, though she wasn't quite as ancient as Mrs.

Wodell. She wore a simple peasant dress, and covered herself with a black knit shawl. Recognizing Ricky, she nodded. "Ah. Yes." Ricky was flattered by her notice of him. Without another word, Madame Xaviera turned her attention to her auguring devices.

With the fortune-teller's back turned, Ricky leaned across the table toward Lance and Colleen. "Well, well? Isn't this cool?" he whispered.

"Calm down," Lance said, also leaning forward and whispering. "Nothing's happened yet."

"Young lady!" Madame Xaviera's voice made everyone jump.

"Yes, ma'am?" Colleen said, when she found her voice again.

The woman smiled brightly. "Such a polite girl. Shall I read your tarot?" Madame Xaviera held up a pine box, out of which she produced a deck of large cards.

Colleen shyly declined. "Oh, no, thank you."

"Go ahead, Colleen," Kirk urged her.

"No, you go first," Colleen told him. "I just want to see how it works."

"Come on, Colleen." Kirk was being gently insistent.

"Sure, Colleen, take a test drive." Now Lance was encouraging her to go. But Colleen felt uneasy.

"I don't know."

Madame Xaviera laughed very pleasantly. "Ah, but the pretty girl *must* go first. I'll do a simple reading, so you see how it works."

The fortune-teller's face seemed warm and friendly. She wasn't nearly as spooky as Colleen would have expected. Madame Xaviera's smile finally won her over.

"Okay… let's do start simple, though. Is that all right?"

"Of course. Here." Madame Xaviera handed her the deck of tarot cards. "Shuffle these until you feel they are ready, then cut them and place them in front of me in three piles."

Colleen first tried to shuffle them like a regular deck of cards. But the tarot cards were larger than normal, almost as big as her hand. She quickly lost control of the deck and managed only to scatter the cards over the surface of the table. She suddenly feared that her clumsiness might have somehow «broken» the cards. But Madame Xaviera smiled at her without recrimination, and Colleen gathered the cards back into a pile. Resorting to scrambling the cards on the table before her, Colleen soon restacked them,

squared them off, and divided them into three piles in front of Madame Xaviera.

"Very good!" declared Madame Xaviera, as if Colleen had just been a particularly clever little child. The woman picked up the three piles in the order opposite that which Colleen had placed them, and made them one stack again. As she slowly dealt out nine cards, she explained, "I will be reading these cards from my left. The first three represent your past. The next three, your present." She dealt the last three with a flourish. "And these, your future.

"Are you ready, young lady?"

After looking at everyone else at the table, Colleen turned back to Madame Xaviera. She took a deep breath and answered, "Okay. Ready."

"Good!" the fortune-teller proclaimed. Then, taking the first card on her left between two thin fingers, Madame Xaviera turned it over. Placing it back on the table in front of her, she tapped it thoughtfully. Everyone else leaned forward to see what it looked like. The card depicted children playing happily under a canopy supported by four long sticks. Beyond the canopy, a house sat on top of a tall hill. Madame Xaviera smiled.

"This is the four of staves," she explained, pointing to the post at each comer of the canopy. "This indicates a happy household, built on a firm foundation. See how happy the children are? Everything is right in their world. As it has been in yours in past years."

"Yes, that's true," Colleen agreed. "I get along with my parents better than most kids I know, I guess." She hoped it didn't show on her face how unimpressed she was by this "revelation."

"Don't worry, child. You wanted me to go easy on you, so I am." Madame Xaviera laughed good-naturedly. Suddenly it didn't matter to Colleen whether any great mysteries were solved in this reading. She realized she was having a great time.

Now Madame Xaviera turned over the next card. On it, a woman sat on a throne, holding a yellow circle with a star in it. When Colleen recognized the symbol as a pentagram, she looked fearfully up to the fortuneteller. Only a pleasant smile rested on her lips.

"That is a coin," said the woman, sensing her fears. "And this is the Queen of Coins. It suggests a woman, or mature girl, with a giving, charitable nature."

"That's you, for sure," Kirk interjected. Then he looked embarrassed at his outburst. "Well," he said defensively, "you are a giving person."

"I'll second that motion," Lance offered, much to Kirk's relief.

Madame Xaviera laughed. "Of course it is you. I sense in you a person others can count on. One who is supportive of others, who gives freely of herself without the expectation of reciprocation."

Colleen's only answer was to blush.

"We'll move on," said Madame Xaviera, winking. Her smile faded when she turned over the final card representing the past. Colleen looked closely and saw a young boy or girl waving a sword in the air. She noticed that from Madame Xaviera's perspective, the card would be upside down.

"This represents the very recent past. You've been having problems lately. With a girl at school, I'd say." Colleen sat up straight in her chair. The woman had her attention now. "Yes, and she's been quite cruel. Striking you, I'd say." At Colleen's look of shock, the fortuneteller needled Colleen gently. "When you play cards, my dear, you should keep a poker face. I may be picking this up by your reactions."

"But I didn't react until you said something." Colleen was suitably impressed. "It's true. There's been this awful girl at school, picking on me."

"You see how the card is upside down? This reversed position alters the meaning of the card. Usually the card means something negative. The reversed meaning of this particular card, and your reaction, indicate she's not going to leave you alone unless she's made to by someone more powerful than she. You should tell a teacher, or another adult you trust."

"I'm sure she'll get bored soon enough. No use telling on her." She saw the dubious looks from the guys at the table. And deep down, even Colleen knew that Vicki wasn't going to let up on her any time soon.

"Let's see what is going on in your life presently." The next card showed a blond man in shining armor, apparently talking to a fish that leaped from the gold chalice he held. "I see you have a new man in your life."

Colleen couldn't help but look up at Lance.

"Maybe," she said coyly.

"Whoever he is," said Madame Xaviera, feigning ignorance, "he is kind, caring, takes great pride in nurturing others, and is a very sensitive individual."

Colleen was speechless. Poker face, Colleen! she thought. Don't be so obvious. Then a dark cloud passed over Kirk's expression. Or so she thought. The cloud was gone the next minute, revealing one of Kirk's characteristic goofy looks. The reading had become very embarrassing, Colleen thought. Within moments, she was even more delightfully embarrassed. The next card Madame Xaviera turned over showed two naked figures, a man and a woman, holding hands. At the bottom of the card were the words "The Lovers."

"Lance and Colleen," Ricky chided. "You dogs!"

"Shut up, Ricky," Lance told him defensively.

Madame Xaviera stepped in, first giving Ricky a withering glance. "Your friend has been here enough to know this card means more than what he's implying," she told Lance. "It means a deep, intimate, loving relationship, not simply carnality. Reversed, it would suggest lasciviousness and vice. But it is right side up. And personally, I think it's a beautiful card."

Kirk rolled his eyes.

"And now," Madame Xaviera announced, "the final card of your present."

Colleen's breath stopped in her chest when she saw the next card. A skeleton sat atop a skeletal horse, trampling people, leaving corpses in its wake. At the bottom of the card, one word: "Death."

But Madame Xaviera's smile did not falter. "Now I am certain this is your first reading. Everyone fears this card, but in its proper position, it portends good things. Only reversed would it mean death, destruction, hopelessness." With a thin finger she pointed out a detail in the card's background. "See the sunrise? What this card shows is not death, but the end of one situation and the beginning of a new one." Then she leaned close to Colleen and whispered, although everyone at the table could hear. "And judging by your previous two cards, it looks like a very wonderful new beginning indeed."

Prophecy or not, Colleen liked what she was hearing.

"Now we see what the future holds." Madame Xaviera turned the next card. Her frown returned, this time with alarming intensity. The woman's eyes seemed glued to the card, which showed a group of people striking each other with staffs. Colleen looked from the scene to the fortune-teller. The room became utterly silent. Even Kirk had stopped fidgeting.

"What is it, Madame Xaviera? What does it mean?"

The fortune-teller took a deep breath. "A battle. And a fierce one at that." She wasn't speaking so much as intoning. Real darkness echoed in her voice for the first time. "Five of staves, reversed. You will be caught in the vortex of a great conflict. Friends, loved ones, others, will be lost."

"So much for 'happily ever after'," joked Kirk. Colleen looked sharply up at Kirk, but it was Madam Xaviera who raged at him.

"I am not joking here. A shadow has fallen upon you. All of you!" Kirk sat back in his seat as if he was afraid she'd strike him. Fiercely Madame Xaviera flipped over the next card. "And your opponent. King of Swords, reversed. Cruel, powerful, merciless. The sight of him will cause you despair." Her voice rose in pitch. Ricky leaned forward, captivated by the fortune-teller's bizarre behavior. Madame Xaviera swept the room with a fiery gaze. "And he will touch all of you!"

"The torch bearer!" Colleen whispered under her breath. Madame Xaviera heard her.

"Yes. There will be fire. And there will be blood." She placed her hand on the final card. "And there will be…" Madame Xaviera quickly turned the card over, slamming it to the table in front of her. When she removed her hand, everyone at the table gasped, even Madame Xaviera. The card before her, which represented Colleen's future, was Death.

Reversed.

Chapter 9

"That's impossible!" cried Madame Xaviera. She held the Death card between two fingers as if she were holding a dead rat by the tail.

"What do you mean?" asked Lance. Colleen was too terrified to speak.

The fortune-teller threw the card down onto the first Death card. She gestured at them agitatedly, as if demanding an explanation from Lance. "There's only one card of each in a tarot deck. Only one Death card. Impossible."

"Maybe it got mixed in from another deck accidentally," Lance offered.

"*I don't have another deck!"* Lance could feel the woman's hot breath on his face from the force of her reply. Then abruptly she rose and crashed through the beaded curtain. The beads swung violently in all directions for several seconds. No one spoke. From the front room, they could hear sounds of a hushed argument.

"Uh, guys," Kirk finally said. "I think it's time to go."

"Please," begged Colleen. "Can we?"

"Good idea," agreed Lance, who stood.

Pushing their chairs away from the table, the rest of them rose to their feet. Madame Xaviera suddenly appeared at the doorway among the beads. She had calmed down somewhat.

"You are leaving, of course." She seemed resigned. "I understand." She stepped aside to let them pass.

Out in the front room, the expression of the Indian woman had not changed. If she had just argued with Madame Xaviera, she showed no sign of it. Her eyes merely blazed characteristically as they passed. When they reached the door, the beads clicked behind them. The fortune-teller watched them go.

"Beware of the darkness that threatens you!" she warned as they left.

When the group got to the car, Kirk shook his head, shell-shocked. "Whoa!" was all he could manage to say. Forgetting about his ritual of leaping into the topless car, he began to unlock the doors. Ricky came up and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Steady there, buddy," he said. "Start the car and hold on. In the excitement, I forgot to settle up."

Lance reached for his wallet. "You need some bucks?"

"Nah, me and Kirk planned on taking care of it. All part of the surprise." He chuckled humorlessly and went back inside. Minutes later, Ricky returned and they headed back into town.

Colleen could not keep her eyes off the fortuneteller's run-down house as they pulled away. It looked even more frightening than when they had arrived. And the neon words fortunes told burned their way into her mind. Fortunes told. She sincerely hoped not.

*** * ***

Kirk spent most of the ride home apologizing for the debacle at Madame Xaviera's place. Both Lance and Colleen told him not to worry about it, but he continued to whip himself.

"I just wanted to do something for you guys that was more than hanging out at the diner or the coffee shop. Damn damn damn!" He agitatedly drummed on the steering wheel as he drove.

Ricky spoke up. "To be fair, it was my idea." Poking Kirk repeatedly on the shoulder, he said, "This guy couldn't come up with anything, so I suggested Madame Xaviera." Kirk swatted Ricky's finger away.

"It's no one's fault," Lance insisted. "And I, for one, appreciate your trying to make up for that stupid stunt last night. I was pretty pissed."

"But it was sweet of you to try to make up for it," Colleen added quickly.

"Besides," continued Lance, "I'm sure the whole thing with the cards was a setup anyway. She doesn't have two decks of cards? I don't believe it for a second. Probably just wanted to get a rise out of a bunch of kids, that was her game."

Colleen wasn't so sure, but said nothing.

"Oh, come on, Colleen," said Lance, reading her silence. "Fortunes usually end only one of two ways. With a tall, dark stranger or death. You just got both!"

"But she said it affects all of us!"

"She probably knew we weren't gonna stick around after a miserable reading like that, so she decided to dilute it."

Colleen couldn't believe there was nothing to what Madame Xaviera had told them. She had looked too serious. Lance saw he was losing Colleen again and called out to Ricky.

"Help me out on this one. You know this lady. What do you think of tonight's command performance?" Even Colleen could tell he just wanted Ricky to agree with him so she would be comforted.

Ricky thought for a moment, then said, "Oh, I think she was just a-funnin' us. Really I do." But he wasn't very convincing. Colleen could tell he was rattled, too. Lance was trying very hard to allay her fears, so she screwed on her bravest face and tried to convince him that he had succeeded. It worked; he believed her.

But her fears remained. And were growing.

* * *

Claiming exhaustion from the night's events, Colleen asked to be dropped off at home early. Lance begged her to stay out with them. Kirk even offered to buy them cappuccinos at Wide Awake, as Lance thought he should have done in the first place. But Colleen held her ground and was in bed before ten-thirty.

When the dreams came, Colleen found herself playing poker with the torch bearer. Despite the bright light that flooded the room, his head remained primarily in silhouette. Occasionally light would reflect off moist tissue, hinting at a face consisting of suppurating flesh. The torch bearer was familiar to her. Someone she knew.

Colleen tried to concentrate on the game. Five-card draw. Nothing wild. And the stakes were very high. Between her and the torch bearer, all of Colleen's friends, each of them doll-sized, working desperately to escape the tiny corral in which they were trapped. Lance pounded futilely at the walls. Ricky tried to boost Kirk over the top of one wall, but only succeeded in throwing him to the ground. Even Melina and Tish were there, their nails bloodied from clawing at the walls as a miniature Vicki urged them on.

The final bets had been placed. It was time to show cards. The stakes were high indeed. Colleen was playing for the lives of her friends and enemies alike. Looking at her hand, Colleen was certain she could save them all.

"Whattaya got?" drawled the torch bearer in a voice that conjured up the image of thousands of screaming witches being burned alive. His breath stank of as many funeral pyres.

Colleen displayed her hand.

Royal straight flush in hearts. Impossible to beat in a no-wild-card game.

A sound escaped the torch bearer's lips. Colleen thought she heard pus bubbling. The meaning was clear; the torch bearer was impressed.

"Nice hand," admitted the torch bearer. Colleen wished he would not speak. For a moment it looked like he was going to fold his hand. What choice did he have? He could not win. But then the torch bearer smiled. The sight of yellow, crooked teeth glowing dimly in an otherwise dark, featureless face was sickening. " 'Cept mine's better." He displayed his hand for her to see. "Five of a kind."

And he did have five of a kind. All Death cards.

"No!" screamed Colleen, but it was too late. The torch bearer was already reaching into the corral with his empty hand. Without thinking, Colleen reached out and grasped his wrist. The feeling of slime sickened her. She thought some of the evil man's flesh was threatening to tear loose, but she tightened her grip all the same. The torch bearer would not claim victory.

The sinister yellow Cheshire cat grin appeared again. Suddenly the Death cards the torch bearer still held exploded into flame. Blazing heat drove Colleen back and she had to let go of the torch bearer. Free from her grasp, he flung the cards into the corral. Colleen's friends and enemies scattered to avoid the flames. The man looked over the scene, pleased by the havoc, the impending death. They would all die unless Colleen acted.

A large book materialized in Colleen's hands. Without thinking, she brought the book down again and again, trying to beat out the flames. The torch bearer laughed at her attempts, even though she began to succeed. Finally the flames were extinguished. But the torch bearer continued to laugh. Colleen soon saw why.

The book had crushed out not only the flames, but the lives of those in the corral. The ones she had meant to save. They all lay crumpled on the floor: burned, broken, some covered by the charred remains of the Death cards. In the process of trying to save them, she had killed them.

The torch bearer continued to laugh. He had planned it all. Colleen screamed when she realized what she had done. She woke up screaming.

Chapter 10

For Colleen, the next day was uneventful. Busy with her report on Joan of Arc and other homework, she saw neither Lance nor Kirk. By the time night fell, the episode with Madame Xaviera was an odd, but harmless, recollection. The nightmares had been forgotten entirely. And when the hour grew late, she approached the prospect of sleep with no worries.

Several blocks away, Tish Hughes felt as though she held a monopoly on anxiety. Huddled at the foot of her bed, she clutched her telephone like a stuffed animal. On the other end of the line, a phone was ringing — once, twice, three times — but no one picked up.

"C'mon, c'mon, c'mon…" she chanted, holding back tears. Finally, on the fourth ring, someone answered.

"Hello?" Violent music blared in the background.

"Vicki," she sobbed. "It's me."

"Huh?" was the only answer. Then: "Hold on." Tish heard the receiver drop to the floor, then some footsteps. In the background, the music faded to a low roar. Footsteps began again, this time becoming louder.

"Yeah?" Vicki asked with some annoyance. "Who is it?"

"Tish," she answered timidly. "What're you listening to?"

The irritation momentarily left Vicki's voice. "New Pierced Eardrums CD. Just came out today." Then the irritation crept back. "Whattaya want? I'm busy doing homework."

Vicki's harsh edge broke Tish's fragile resolve not to cry. "Can I please come over, Vicki?" she sobbed. "I just got into a huge fight with my parents. They're so mean! Please? I won't bother you or anything."

Tish could hear Vicki's scorn through the phone lines. "Quit crying and just deal with it, okay? Don't ya think I got my own problems?"

"Well, yes, but…"

"Well, yes, but," Vicki mimicked her cruelly. "But nothing. I'll deal with my problems. You deal with yours. For once."

"Please, Vicki." Why did she have to be so mean all the time? "I need somewhere to go for a while."

"Then try Bermuda. I hear the weather's nice this time of year. Just get a grip, will ya?" Then the line went dead and Tish was left listening to a dial

tone. In shock, she didn't move to hang up until a recorded voice asked her to do so.

Angry and sad at the same time, Tish pulled the phone cord out of the wall, then flung herself onto her bed. Burying her face in her pillow, she cried hard for several minutes. Then, as so often happened, the anger overcame the sadness and she stopped. Tish stared into the blackness created by the pillowcase and saw herself. Taking a bus. Or a plane. Or a boat. Or anything that would take her far away from here.

Tish had run away before, but this time would be different. Before, in the back of her mind, she had always wanted to be found. She had imagined a tearful reunion with her parents, who were glad to see her again. And to make sure she would never run away again, they'd treat her better. Much better. It had actually been like that the first couple of times. Things would go better for a few days at least. Then, gradually, the bad times would return. Soon her parents didn't seem to care much anymore when she ran away. This time she'd run away for good. Maybe even to Bermuda, though she had no idea how to get there with no money. It didn't matter. Somewhere else was where she needed to be. Her parents didn't care about her. And her so-called friends sure didn't.

Tish lay on her bed, scheming until her parents went to sleep. Then, quietly, she got up and stuffed some clothing into a backpack. Creeping down the stairs, she made it out the front door without waking her parents. The tears returned when she reached the end of her driveway. Glancing back, she took one last look at her house. For a moment, her will began to bend and she almost ran back inside. Instead, she forced herself to turn and hurry away, her backpack bouncing with each step.

I'm never coming back, she thought as the night swallowed her. No one will find me this time.

And she was right: Tish Hughes was never seen again.

Chapter 11

Monday morning was beautiful, and Colleen decided to walk to school. She started early so she wouldn't have to rush. As she passed the Hughes house, she saw a police car in the driveway. Colleen barely give it a thought. The sight was sadly unsurprising. Between Tish's penchant for running away and Mr. Hughes's notorious temper, the police visited the house frequently.

Later at school, when Colleen saw only Vicki and Melina in the hallways, she guessed that Tish had run away. She almost asked, but since they hadn't harassed her that day, it seemed unwise put herself in the line of fire. It wasn't until history class, when Kirk leaned over, that Colleen heard the buzz now coursing through the school.

"You hear about Tish?" he whispered. Colleen responded with a slightly irritated, questioning look. She didn't like to talk in class unless the teacher was permitting it, as he had last week. Kirk saw the look and frowned at her. "Ah, don't worry about it. Anyway, she may have been kidnapped!"

This got Colleen's attention, though given Kirk's penchant for melodrama, she didn't really believe him. Still trying not to talk, she tried to convey her skepticism with her eyes.

"No, really. She may have started running away, but something happened." He took a deep breath, as if he couldn't believe what he was about to say. "Some kid found her stuff, a backpack with clothes and stuff, in a gutter a mile away from her house." Then a look of deep concern crossed his face. "Near your house. You hear anything last night?"

Colleen saw that Kirk was serious. She was about to answer when a voice stopped her.

"You two in the back," called Mr. Klusky in a bored voice. "This is a classroom, not a coffee shop."

Kirk sat bolt upright in his chair and gave her a sheepish grin. "Later," he mouthed.

Colleen nodded and tried to return her attention to the front of the room. It was impossible to concentrate now, though. If what Kirk had said was true, then something horrible had happened. And very close to her own

house. Creepy. Her thoughts turned to Mr. and Mrs. Hughes. How were they feeling right now? Even a supposed ogre like Mr. Hughes must be frightened for his daughter. And Vicki, she thought, turning to look surreptitiously toward the back of the room. Well, Vicki only sat there, looking more bored than ever.

The class ended an interminable twenty minutes later. Instead of waiting for Kirk to tell the rest of the story, she caught up to Vicki just outside the classroom.

"Hey, Vicki! Wait!"

Vicki turned, a look of surprise momentarily erasing her perpetual snarl when she realized who was calling her. The snarl returned quickly enough.

"What do you want, weenie?"

"I heard about Tish," Colleen said, ignoring the dig. "Is it true?"

"What? That she's been kidnapped?" Vicki uttered a short, harsh laugh, then shrugged. "Doubt it. She's just getting showy." Colleen thought she detected a little tremor in Vicki's voice. As if she were trying to convince herself of something she didn't really believe.

"Well, I hope that's all it is. I…"

"What do you care, anyway?" Vicki demanded. She started forward, backing Colleen against the wall. "Maybe she got sliced and diced by some psycho. Even I don't care that much."

"D-don't say that," Colleen stammered. "You don't mean that."

"How do you know what I mean, weenie?" Vicki seemed on the verge of a violent act. Her eyes became narrow slits. "What are you bothering me for, anyway?"

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry if anything happened to Tish." Colleen's voice was very small. "Since you guys were friends."

Vicki said nothing for a moment. She regarded Colleen incredulously. For a moment, Colleen thought Vicki might burst into tears. Then her eyes went wide and she threw back her head in a laugh.

"You are a *freak*!" And she continued to laugh cruelly. Colleen tried to use the opportunity to slip away, but Vicki pushed her back. "I don't think so."

Just then, Vicki was pulled away. Colleen looked up, expecting to see Mr. Klusky, but instead, Kirk stood there. Miraculously, Vicki didn't deck him.

"Hey, give her a break, Vicki." He looked her square in the eye and didn't flinch. "She was just trying to be nice."

Vicki tried to stare him down for a few seconds, but finally gave in. "Well, tell your girlfriend not to be so nice. People get hurt that way." With that, she violently pushed Kirk's hand off her shoulder and walked away.

When Vicki was out of sight, Kirk pulled Colleen away from the wall and walked her to her locker.

"Sorry," he said, embarrassed.

"Sorry?" Colleen gulped. The encounter had left her breathless. Vicki's hostility had been worse than she'd ever seen it. "You have nothing to be sorry about. Thanks for swooping in when you did."

"Well, yeah, I just mean sorry for her comment. About you being my girlfriend. I don't want you to think…"

"Don't worry, Kirk," she interrupted. "Vicki was just trying to embarrass both of us. Frankly, I was too scared to be embarrassed." She laughed; so did Kirk. "I thought she was really gonna hurt me."

They arrived at Colleen's locker and she began to twirl the dial on the combination lock to open it.

"I thought she was gonna hurt you, too," Kirk told her. Still shaky, she misdialed the combination and had to start over. "Otherwise, I'm not prone to heroics, y'know." He acknowledged his legendary cowardice with a nervous laugh.

"I don't know if she would have really, though." Colleen got the combination right this time and the door swung open. "She's just upset about Tish, I think, and…"

Something dropped out of Colleen's locker. Something she hadn't put there.

"What's that?" Kirk asked, as he picked up the colorful piece of cardboard that had flipped end over end to the ground. He held it up and both of them gasped at what it was: a tarot card.

On its face leered the grinning skull of Death.

Chapter 12

"Kirk!" Colleen yelled, pushing the Death card away. "I don't think that's very funny." Hastily she snatched the books for her next class out of her locker and slammed the door. Turning on her heels, she abruptly walked away.

"Wait, Colleen!" He caught up with her and grabbed her shoulder. She shrugged him off. "I didn't do this!"

"Yeah, right!" she snapped, nearly running to get away from him. After her run-in with Vicki, Kirk's little joke was just too much.

"Honest. I didn't." Something in his voice made her stop. But she was no less angry.

"Who else would have done it?" Kirk opened his mouth to answer, but she didn't let him. "Who else would have known, except you, Lance, and Ricky? Lance would never do something like this. And if Ricky did it…" Colleen became aware that she was on the verge of yelling, but she didn't care.

Kirk hung his head. At first she thought it was because he felt bad, but Colleen soon noticed he was trying to hide a strange look on his face. "Look, I'm sorry, I really didn't do it. And if I find Ricky did it, I'll kill him. I swear." It sounded as if he was trying to stifle laughter.

"What?" She grabbed his chin and pulled his face up. Kirk was smiling. "You jerk! You *did* do it."

"No!" he cried, not able to hold the laughter down anymore. "No, I didn't do it. It's just that…" He stopped laughing, and then his face became very serious. "It's just that I've never seen you fight back before. Why don't you fight back against Vicki? *She* deserves it."

At first Colleen didn't know what to say. All at once she was disappointed in herself for how she had attacked Kirk. "Well, Vicki can't help the way she is." It was her standard line, but for once, it sounded hollow even to Colleen.

"Yes she can," Kirk insisted. "She's not an idiot. Just a mean girl. You do to her what you just did to me, and I bet she wouldn't pick on you so much."

Colleen's face felt very warm. "I'm sorry for yelling at you. I didn't even give you a chance to defend yourself."

"No sweat off my nose," Kirk said. "I just think you should start giving Vicki what for."

"We're gonna be late for class," Colleen said quickly. Though this was true, she was really more interested in changing the subject.

Kirk knew what she was thinking. "Okay. I'll see you later." Colleen started walking away. "I'll check with Ricky about the card." He now had to yell to be heard. "If he did it, I'll kill him! I swear." Hurrying, Colleen just made it through the doorway of math class as the bell rang.

*** * ***

That evening, just as Colleen finished her homework, Lance called. He said he was meeting Kirk at Wide Awake and asked if she wanted to join them.

Colleen had to beg her parents to let her out of the house. They were nervous because of Tish's disappearance. But they trusted Lance, and so let her go, as long as she was back no later than ten-thirty. Luckily, Lance came to pick her up right away.

"A big storm's supposed to be moving in, honey," Mrs. Martini called from the front door as Colleen got into Lance's car. "If it starts to rain, I want Lance to bring you back before it gets too bad out."

"I will, Mrs. Martini!" Lance yelled back, winking at Colleen.

"If you're stranded somewhere, call!" Mrs. Martini added. Colleen simply waved in reply as Lance pulled out of the driveway.

Once they were on their way, Lance asked about Colleen's day. Colleen told him everything, minus the part about the Death card in her locker. She knew he'd think Kirk had done it, and she didn't want the cousins to fight. Luckily, the drive to the coffee shop only took a few minutes, so technically, she didn't have time to bring it up anyway. Inside, Kirk and Ricky waited at a booth.

"Dude and dudette!" Kirk greeted them. Ricky just nodded and winked.

As soon as Lance and Kirk sat down, a waitress descended upon them. She took their orders and went back to fill them. While they waited, Kirk

asked about Mrs. Wodell.

"So, how's the old lady doing?" They'd all been wondering.

"Slow," Lance told them. "I read her a list of words that the doctors gave me, and she repeats them." He shrugged sadly. "Or tries to. You can really tell how hard she's trying, and how frustrated she gets when the words come out wrong."

Colleen rubbed Lance's back. She could tell he was feeling Mrs. Wodell's frustration. "How sad," she said aloud.

"Wow," Kirk said, amazed. "A woman like that, not to be able to talk. It must be killing her!"

"Kirk!" Colleen shot him a harsh look.

"I'm not being mean. The woman liked to talk. Am I wrong?"

"It's just the way you say it," Colleen answered, but she could see that he hadn't intended to be mean after all.

"I wouldn't say it's killing her, but it *is* rough on her," Lance said. "She does enjoy when I read to her. She kind of smiles and just relaxes. Things don't seem so hopeless then."

"What're ya reading her?" asked Ricky. "Let me guess. *Little Women? Jane Eyre?"*

"Actually, *Grimm's Fairy Tales."*

Colleen and Kirk were surprised. Ricky, however, seemed pleased.

"Wow, gruesome stuff. Hardly little-old-lady material."

Lance just shrugged. "She was reading it when she had her stroke. I tried to read her something else, but she wouldn't let me. She didn't speak, exactly, but she communicated with gestures pretty clearly what she wanted."

"Wow," said Ricky. "There's a woman after my own heart! Maybe I should come read to her," he told Lance. "I'm much more qualified for scary stuff than you are."

"Right," Lance laughed. "I can imagine you reading *Grimm's Fairy Tales* to Mrs. Wodell. You'd probably make it so vivid, you'd give the poor woman a heart attack!"

"Lance!" Colleen giggled as she swatted his arm. Somehow, when he said things like that, they didn't sound quite as mean. All at once, she remembered that Mrs. Wodell and Lance weren't the only inhabitants of the old woman's house. "How's Denny? Do you see him there?"

"I used to," Lance answered, a quizzical expression on his face. "He used to come home and look in on us before going to his room. Always had a smile. Now he goes straight to his room."

"Is he sick?" asked Colleen.

"I dunno. He doesn't talk, either, you know." Lance seemed to be seeing Denny in his mind. "To tell you the truth, he's making me a little nervous."

"I bet it's spooky being in a house with two nonverbal people," Kirk suggested. Lance thought it over.

"Maybe that's it," Lance replied. Then he shrugged off the clouds that seemed to have descended upon him. "Anyway, I know Denny's a good guy. He's probably just upset for Mrs. Wodell, that's all."

Just then, a flash of lightning lit the coffee shop. The group looked outside as another flash occurred. In it, they could see the outlines of heavy clouds marking the approach of a rainstorm.

Colleen turned to Lance. "I bet my parents are freaking out right now. I'd better get home."

"Aw, but you just got here," whined Kirk. "Stay a few more minutes."

"Nah, cuz," Lance told him as he stood. "You should've seen her mother when she left. Colleen's right." Colleen pushed out of the booth and waved good-bye to Kirk and Ricky.

"By the way," Ricky said. "It wasn't me." At first, Colleen didn't know what he was talking about. Then she remembered the card. "Promise!"

Lance looked at both of them questioningly.

"I'll tell you in the car," Colleen said as lightning flashed once more. Several seconds later, thunder rumbled in the distance. " 'Bye guys."

Lance took her arm and walked her to the door. In the reflection of the front window, Colleen noticed someone she recognized. Turning around, she saw Vicki sitting in a booth toward the back of the coffee shop. Melina sat beside her. Instead of turning away when Colleen discovered them staring at her, they both simply smiled. Colleen was instantly certain that they had been watching her the entire time she had been there. Almost as proof, Vicki formed her forefinger and thumb into the shape of a gun and "fired." Colleen jumped as if she had been struck by an invisible bullet. Colleen shot out of the coffee shop, dragging along a surprised Lance, who had stopped to see what she was looking at.

"Slow down!" he told her when they were outside. She was practically running.

"Those girls are so horrible!" Colleen yelled, close to tears. The fact that they had been watching her made her feel worse than if there had been a confrontation. How could she defend herself if she didn't even know they were there?

"You mean Vicki and her clone?" Lance draped an arm around her, slowing her to a walk. "Don't worry. They're just a couple of high school kids." He regretted the statement as soon as he had said it, but it was too late. Colleen turned on him.

"Is that how you think of me?" she demanded. "A high school kid?"

"Of course not. Certainly not like them." But that didn't score him any points, either.

"What am I like, then? Am I an easier mark than high school girls like them?"

"No, that's not true," he quietly told her. "I like you because of you, and high school has nothing to do with it." Then he laughed tentatively. "If it did, I probably *wouldn't* be going out with you. If a college guy gets caught dating a high school girl, his friends rake him over the coals." He had begun to brighten, but then bowed his head and held both her hands. "But I don't have many friends at college anyway. Why do think I hang out with a dork like my cousin? And even if I did have friends, they'd have to accept me going out with you, or they wouldn't be my friends." Then he looked her straight in the eyes. "Do you believe me?"

So mesmerized was Colleen by Lance's eyes that she almost forgot to answer. As it was, she only nodded. Lightning flashed once more, followed almost immediately by thunder. The first raindrops began to fall.

"I'd better get you home!" Lance said. "Race you to the car!" Without waiting for an answer, he took off running. Colleen didn't have a chance, but at least he had the doors unlocked by the time she got there.

Chapter 13

A cloud of cigarette smoke rose from the table where Vicki and Melina sat. When it cleared, the booth formerly occupied by Colleen and her friends was empty; Kirk and Ricky hadn't stayed much longer after the others left.

Vicki ground her cigarette into an ashtray, extinguishing it. "We can get out of here," she told Melina, and stood. Melina didn't move.

"Uh, excuse me, mind telling me what we came here for anyway?" Vicki had dragged her out tonight without explanation, and was now dragging her away in the same manner. She was none too pleased.

Vicki raised a bored eyebrow and plopped back down into her seat. "Had some business to take care of. Didn't work quite the way it was planned, but we got the job done anyway."

"What? Hassle Colleen? I'm all for it when we run into her at school, but do we have to waste time looking for her?"

"We didn't look for her. I knew where she was gonna be." Vicki's expression was mysteriously self-satisfied.

"What's going on?" Melina asked curtly, the closest she had ever come to demanding information from Vicki.

Vicki didn't answer immediately. She never did. Instead, she slowly lit a cigarette, then took a long drag. The ash glowed bright orange at the tip. Vicki stared at the ember, and for a moment, Melina felt as if her friend had forgotten she existed. Vicki had made an art of such gestures.

"Oh, just a little conspiracy to split Colleen and her boyfriend. Nothing you have to worry about."

But Melina was not satisfied. "What? You expect to impress Lance by trashing his girlfriend? Ha! I'm sure that'll just make him flip for you!"

Vicki turned suddenly on Melina. "Don't butt in where you don't have business, Melina. Stage one is to get him away from that twerpy girl." Then she relaxed and leaned back in her chair, smoking luxuriously. "Stage two will call for different tactics. Believe me." Melina was looking at her as if she were crazy, but Vicki didn't mind. Her friend didn't know half of what was going on. But that was nothing new, Vicki thought, causing her to snicker to herself.

"I'm sorry, Vicki," Melina said carefully, "but you're getting kinda creepy these days. This obsession with the college guy. And what about Tish? You've barely said anything about her. Aren't you even worried? I am."

This time Vicki was angry. "You're beginning to sound like that mouse Colleen," Vicki spat with disgust. "Look, Tish loved to try throwing herself to the wolves. I'm supposed to feel bad if she finally found one? Gimme a break."

Suddenly Melina seized upon something. "She called you that night. Didn't she?"

Vicki was caught totally off guard. "What are you talking about?"

For the first time, Melina rose up against Vicki. "Don't deny it. I can see it in your eyes. She had a fight with her parents. Everyone knows that. But she called you for help. She'd do that, because she looked up to you." She narrowed her eyes. "Like I did. Or used to. But you probably told her to get a life or something. So she ran away!" Melina's eyes glowed mutinously.

"You're the one who needs a life," Vicki snarled. She got up once more, shoving the table away from her and almost knocking Melina down. "Whatever your problem is, keep it away from me!" Vicki stalked out of the coffee shop. The springs on the front door kept her from slamming it shut.

Melina pushed the table away from her and stood. Scanning the coffee shop, she saw no one she recognized. This meant Melina had to find her own way home, since she had caught a ride with Vicki. Thunder reminded Melina that a downpour was in progress, but she didn't think of calling home. Her parents had little sympathy for her, and she didn't want to give them a chance to show it. So it was time for the bus.

Luckily, the bus stop she needed was covered. Unfortunately, she became soaked on the walk to the bus stop. Since it was a weekday night, it took the bus a full forty-five minutes before it arrived to pick her up. The transfer to the second bus took an additional half hour. Nearly two hours later, Melina stepped out into the rain from the bus stop nearest her house. She had a good ten-minute walk ahead of her.

Melina began to sneeze as she neared the street where her house was located. I'm gonna catch a cold, she thought to herself grimly. And tomorrow, she thought with more cheer, I'm gonna go up to Vicki and

unload some contagious mucus in her face. Melina was smiling as lightning struck a nearby power line and the lights winked out.

Stopping in her tracks, Melina allowed her eyes to get used to the dark. Unfortunately, the clouds of the storm obscured what would have been a nearly full moon. Her choices were to stay in one place and get pneumonia or start walking and get pneumonia and get home. She got back under way. Her only obstacle was the lightning. Each flash halted her in her tracks. For a moment the entire neighborhood was lit clear as day, and then for the next minute, Melina could see nothing until her eyes readjusted to the darkness.

It was during a lightning flash as Melina neared her house that she noticed someone walking toward her. She stopped. Who would be out walking in weather like this? she wondered. There can't be another person in this city with as mean a friend as Vicki. But by the time lightning flashed again, the figure had disappeared.

Maybe the person had gone into a house, she thought.

Maybe no one had been there, and she was just seeing things.

Maybe.

But she would rather be home than standing here in the rain, so she started forward again. Only a few more houses. Then a warm bath. Yes. That would ward off a cold, she thought. Tomorrow, sick or not, she would deal with Vicki. If she wasn't sick, she would warn Colleen about Vicki's designs on Lance. Melina really didn't understand why Vicki seemed to hate Colleen so much. Or anyone, for that matter. Melina shook the rain from her hair as she reached her house at last.

Strong hands closed around Melina's neck as she started up her walk. She tried to pull away, but the hands held her tight. So tight she couldn't scream. And even though she was not ten yards away from her own front door, no one would have heard her anyway. The rain and thunder were too loud. Then Melina realized that the sound she was hearing wasn't thunder at all. It was the pounding of blood in her ears. The sound grew louder and louder. Then it stopped. They stopped.

The pounding — and Melina's heart.

Chapter 14

Melina's body was found sprawled on her own front lawn the next morning by the paperboy. Pandemonium erupted at Springwood High shortly thereafter. The superintendent nearly canceled for the day, but changed his mind at the last minute. Many parents kept their children home anyway. Colleen managed to convince her mother that staying cooped up alone in the house all day would drive her crazy.

At the high school, the hallways were only half-full. Colleen saw few of her friends. Even Kirk was nowhere to be found. Due to low attendance, most classes simply became study halls. In history class, most desks were empty, including Vicki's. Despite the way Vicki always treated her, Colleen wondered how she was doing. She had lost her two closest friends in as many days. That would be rough on anyone.

Colleen tried to contact both Lance and Kirk at lunchtime, but could reach neither of them. The rest of the day slipped by in a gray haze. As Colleen approached her locker after her last class, it seemed to her the day had been somewhat of an anticlimax.

Then she saw the Death card taped to her locker.

At first she stared at it in disbelief. Then she looked around frantically, as if the perpetrator might be watching to catch her reaction. But the hallways were practically empty by now, and the few students nearby were paying no attention to her. Colleen felt fear, but that left quickly. It was replaced by anger. Swiftly she yanked the card off her locker and crumpled it into a ball. Instead of throwing it out, she stuffed it in her backpack. Then, full of furious energy, she threw open the door to her locker and stuffed what she needed into the backpack, burying the card. That done, she slammed the locker shut, closed the lock with a snap, and ran to the nearest pay phone.

Dropping money into it, she dialed Kirk at home once more. His mother answered.

"Hi, Mrs. Newman," Colleen said, trying to keep her voice under control. "Is Kirk there?"

"I'm sorry, dear, he's not. He was home most of the day with a cold, and then the library called. They're having such a time there, what with

Mrs. Wodell out and all. Poor woman. Can I give him a message for you?"

"No, I've got to go there anyway. Thanks, Mrs. Newman."

"You're welcome, dear," Mrs. Newman said cheerily. Then a note of concern crept into her voice. "You're not going alone, are you? With what happened to that poor girl, I'm sure your mother wouldn't want you to be out on the streets alone."

Colleen lied. "I'm meeting Lance there, but thanks." She was ready to hang up, but Mrs. Newman wasn't.

"Is he working today? I thought he was taking care of the librarian at home?"

"I don't know. I just spoke to him and he said he'd meet me. And if they called in Kirk, they probably need Lance, too."

"Yes, that's right." Luckily, Mrs. Newman didn't need too much convincing. "Well, take care, dear."

"I will. Thanks." And Colleen was able to hang up.

The library was only a few blocks away. Colleen's seething anger powered a run the entire way. She was breathless as she pushed the front door of the library open and entered. Standing inside for a moment, she caught her breath. Colleen located a cart full of books after a quick search. Kirk could not be far away. Marching over to the cart, she found him halfway down the aisle between the bookshelves.

"Kirk!" she whisper-shouted. Startled, he clutched his chest as though he were having a heart attack when he realized it was only her. But the smile on his face evaporated when he noticed her distress. "What's this?!" she demanded, not letting him speak. She dug into her backpack for the card, found it, and tossed it at him.

"Hey!" he exclaimed as he caught the card just before it hit his face. "What…?" he wondered aloud as unfolded the ball.

"What's going on, Kirk?" She was certain he was behind this, but she didn't know why.

When Kirk saw the Death card, his face became grave. "I'm sorry, Colleen. But I swear I'm not doing this."

"But no one else would, Kirk. I mean, maybe Ricky, but only if you told him to. I don't know what you're trying to prove."

"Nothing, Colleen. You have to believe me." He was pleading with her.

"Wait a minute!" Colleen's brain made a connection. "Did you or Ricky say anything about the psychic to Vicki?"

"No, why?"

"One for each of them," Colleen declared. Kirk simply looked more baffled.

"What?"

"The first card showed up just after Tish disappeared. The second one after Melina."

"I dunno, Colleen," Kirk cautioned. "That's a big leap. What you're suggesting isn't just mean. It's crazy."

"I know… but it's obvious this is upsetting her more than she's letting on. Maybe it's worse than I think. And I would naturally be her target."

Kirk thought a moment. Then, after he made sure no one was listening to them, he told her, "Let it go. You can't prove it, unless she admits to it. And just acknowledging that it's bothering you might make things worse."

"I thought you were the one who said to fight back."

He nodded, acknowledging her point. "A direct attack, yeah. But if you go off on her like this, before you're certain, well, you could be making a mistake."

Colleen studied Kirk closely. She was getting very mixed signals from him. "Is there something you're not telling me?" she asked.

"No, not at all," he said firmly. "I'm just saying, don't go off half-cocked. If you attack her without any proof, it might backfire, and you could get into trouble."

She understood what he was getting at, but it still seemed strange to her. Kirk saw her discomfort.

"Look, I may be able to find something out." Then a mischievous light sparkled in his eyes. "Y'know, with my network of spies. And if I get something concrete, then I'll tell you. And we'll do something about it. Meantime, don't let it bug you."

"Okay, fine." What he was saying made total sense now. And even though he exaggerated his "spy network," he did have a group of friends who could find out if Vicki was really up to something. "And thanks. I'm sorry I blamed you." She gave him a little hug to make up to him.

Kirk blushed. "I understand. It's a little freaky."

"Try a lot freaky!" Colleen responded with a laugh.

"Okay, a lot." Kirk returned her smile. "Now, will you let me get back to work?"

"Yeah, I'll see ya later." For his good-bye, Kirk winked at her like James Dean.

As she approached the front of the library to leave, Colleen passed the stairway leading to the basement. She stopped for a moment. Instead of walking out the front door, she started down the steps. She realized that she hadn't seen Denny since their encounter in the basement. If he was here, now would be a good time to tell him that others appreciated what he was doing for Mrs. Wodell.

Though Colleen's attitude about the basement had improved, the air down there hadn't. Nor had the lighting. But this time, the atmosphere seemed more dreary than foreboding. Of course, it was deserted, or at least seemed to be. Walking slowly, Colleen peered down every aisle, hoping to catch a glimpse of Denny. Realizing what she was doing, Colleen had to stop and laugh at herself. Denny was a person, not Bigfoot. And he wasn't deaf.

Standing near the central study table, she softly called out his name. "Denny! Are you down here?" Only silence answered her. "I just wanted to say hello." She felt silly, talking to thin air like this. He might be somewhere else at the moment. But she continued through the basement anyway. "I know you're looking after Mrs. Wodell. Lance told me." Still no answer. "Anyway, he thinks it's great that you're there, and I think it's great. And I know Mrs. Wodell appreciates it. She cares a lot about you."

Colleen approached the last row, where she had found her book. There was still no sign of Denny. She sighed — then nearly shrieked when Denny appeared suddenly from a dim aisleway. Instinctively she shrank back. Like her reflection in a distorted fun house mirror, Denny also backed away.

"Oh! You got me again," Colleen laughed. "Guess I'm a bundle of nerves lately." And just like that, she didn't know what to say. Everything she had meant to say, she'd already said as she'd walked through the basement. "I, for one, don't think you're a bad guy," she said spontaneously. "I just wanted you to know that."

Colleen smiled at him, mainly because she truly had nothing else to say. But Denny did not smile back. Studying his face more closely, she saw deep worry.

"Is something wrong, Denny?" He did not answer, even with a gesture, but his expression radiated hopelessness. "It's okay, Denny," she told him. "Whatever it is, it's all right." She reached up to touch his shoulder, hoping

to comfort him. But before she could, he suddenly grabbed her by the wrist. Anger and frustration now seemed to consume him. Instinctively Colleen tried to pull away, but he held her tight. She had no idea what he intended to do next.

Just then, there came shouts from the direction of the stairway. Denny let go of Colleen as they both turned at the same time. Heavy footsteps tramped down the stairs. Several police officers, possibly up to six of them, ran nearly single file down the narrow aisles toward them.

"You! Don't move!" someone shouted.

Colleen froze. Glancing into Denny's eyes, she saw terror.

When the officers got to within several yards of them, two officers dropped to their knees and drew their guns. Another two stood behind them, their guns also drawn. The other officers disappeared down a book aisle.

The guns' hammers being drawn back and set made loud clicks. The whole thing happened very fast.

"Step away from him, miss," one of the officers ordered.

Chapter 15

At first, Colleen could neither speak nor move. Denny was rooted in place. Then more clicks sounded from the other end of the aisle. They were completely blocked.

"I said, step away from him, miss," the officer repeated, more sternly. Then to Denny he snarled, "You, get your hands up. I know you can understand me." Denny's arms shot into the air.

Colleen finally found her voice. "What's going on?" But she did not move.

The officers in the aisle began to close in on them. A female officer from the group in front of them also began approaching. "Get away from him. He's wanted in connection with a kidnapping, and possibly a murder. You're not safe until you're behind us." She gestured to her furiously. "Now, come on."

Colleen understood what was happening now. The officer was talking about Tish and Melina. She glanced at Denny, whose eyes were fixed on the guns pointed at him. He was so petrified, he seemed to have forgotten Colleen was there. Colleen walked forward with her hands up in the air, preventing a clear shot at Denny.

"Look, we're friends." She walked slowly, to the obvious frustration of the police officers. "He didn't do anything. There's been some mistake."

Suddenly the policewoman lunged forward at Colleen.

"No!" she screamed as she was dragged into another aisle, out of harm's way. Colleen heard another officer shout, "Let's go!" On the ground, she saw them run past the end of the aisle toward Denny. Other sounds indicated the backup officers were doing the same. Colleen braced herself for the crack of gunfire. Thankfully, there was none.

"Sorry I had to do that, miss," the woman police officer told her perfunctorily as she helped Colleen to her feet. Colleen glimpsed the other officers hustling a frightened Denny away, and started to run out to stop them. The officer who had tackled her held her back.

"Let me go," Colleen yelled. "He didn't do anything."

The police officer shook her head. "I'm sorry about your friend. But we got a tip and searched his apartment. Found the driver's license of the

missing girl."

Colleen was momentarily stunned. "That doesn't mean anything. It could have been planted."

The officer just shook her head. "That's not all we found. Other IDs, lots of pictures, all of young girls. Just like you." Confident that Denny had now been spirited out of the library, Officer Clark relaxed her grip on Colleen's arm. "You might have been in some danger. Maybe not today, but the way things have been lately, soon."

Colleen yanked her arm away and just stared at the officer. What she was saying about Denny was impossible. Without another word, Colleen walked away. The officer shadowed her at a relaxed distance.

When they got upstairs, they found the library in an uproar. Denny had been taken away. Colleen went straight to Kirk, who was hovering near the checkout counter. He pounced on her with questions as soon as he saw her.

"What happened?" he asked breathlessly.

"Wait, hold on." Colleen had an eye on the remaining police officers. They were talking among themselves near the front door of the library, then left. Going to the door, Colleen peered through and watched them drive away in their patrol car. She went immediately back to Kirk.

"They think Denny had something to do with Tish and Melina."

Kirk was shocked at the news. "That's impossible!"

"I know," Colleen replied. "But they said they found Tish's driver's license in his apartment. And some other stuff."

"What other stuff?" Kirk was intrigued.

"Pictures. Of girls. Like me," she said, mimicking the officer.

"Oh, that's not good," Kirk said gravely.

But Colleen wasn't listening. Something about what the police officer had said tripped a switch in Colleen's brain. Abruptly she turned to Kirk and asked, "Doesn't Denny have an office of some sort downstairs?"

"More of a closet, really," Kirk answered, mystified.

"Is it unlocked?"

"Uh, I guess so. Why?"

"I want to check something. Where is it?"

Kirk looked concerned. "What are you gonna do? What if the police come back?"

Kirk's bewilderment would have amused Colleen if her purpose had not been so serious. "They won't come back. And I'm not going to take

anything or mess anything up. I just wanna see something."

"Okay," Kirk said slowly. "Fine. The door is off a little alcove in the back of the basement. On the left wall past the study table area."

"Great. This won't take long," Colleen said, and she started to walk away. Kirk's voice stopped her.

"Uh, Colleen." She turned to face him. He seemed even more concerned than before. "You're gonna look for something to prove that they took Denny in by mistake, huh?"

"I don't know what I'll find," she answered honestly. "Well." He looked down at his shoes before he continued. Then he faced her again. "What if you find that it wasn't a mistake?"

Their eyes locked for a moment. It was a good question. One that Colleen didn't want to answer.

"I'll be right back," was all that she would say. But she pondered Kirk's question all the way down the stairs.

Colleen found the alcove just where Kirk had said it was. The basement was particularly dark in this area, and the alcove was practically a black hole. Jiggling a light switch up and down several times had no effect. It seemed a bulb had burned out in this area. Soon Colleen's eyes adjusted and she saw the door that led to Denny's "office." Grasping the doorknob, she thought once more about Kirk's question.

What if she found something that showed he was responsible for what had happened to Tish and Melina? What would she do?

Steeling herself against the dreaded "what ifs," Colleen turned the knob. The door swung open silently. The room was pitch-black. First she slid her hand against the wall on either side of the doorway. No light switches. Then what little light entered the room glinted off a small metal object suspended in midair a few feet away. A string led up into darkness. Colleen pulled the string and a single, low-wattage bulb lit the small janitor's closet.

Colleen's eyes went wide when she saw what it contained.

*** * ***

Within ten minutes, Colleen was back upstairs. When Kirk saw her, he quickly finished with the patron he was helping and ran over to her.

"So what's the story? Guilty or innocent?" His mood had lightened since she had gone down. Apparently he had spent the time romanticizing the incident. Colleen was irritated, but too distracted to show it.

"Well, the police weren't wrong about one thing," she said.

"Hey, wait! What's down there?" Kirk was eager for dirt.

"Take a look when you get a break," she told him. "I'll talk to you about it tomorrow."

"That's not fair!" Kirk whined.

"I know," Colleen acknowledged. "But there's some stuff I have to do, to think about. Okay?"

Kirk decided not to push her. "Okay. I'll talk to you later."

"Tomorrow," Colleen insisted. "It's been a rough day. I'm going to try to get some homework done, then I'm going to bed early."

"Got it. Man, I can't wait to see what's down there." Colleen ignored his morbid enthusiasm. "Get some rest. Talk to you in the morning."

*** * ***

Colleen went straight home. Her parents talked about Denny's arrest all through dinner, but Colleen said little. If they had known she had been present when the police took Denny away, a major family crisis would have occurred. Besides, Colleen didn't feel much like talking. She had too much thinking to do. About Denny. About what she had seen in his office. And what could be done. Because for the first time, Colleen was certain she had to take action. And somehow, she felt as though she was the only one who could do what needed to be done.

After dinner, Colleen tried to call Lance. His mother said that he was at Mrs. Wodell's, and "wasn't that terrible about the janitor? And Lance, not to mention helpless Mrs. Wodell, were in the same house with a murderer." Colleen gave a noncommittal response and hung up.

Colleen managed to borrow her mother's car by saying she had to take something to Lance at Mrs. Wodell's house. Mrs. Martini was reluctant at first, but now that Denny was behind bars, didn't have a good reason not to let her daughter out alone. Seeing Lance would have been nice, but that wasn't what Colleen had in mind. Instead, she drove directly to the police station. Inside, she asked to see Denny.

"Uh, I don't think that would be a good idea," Officer Radley, the policeman on duty, told her. "Considering what he's suspected of."

"He's my friend." Colleen was not going to be turned away. "His arrest is a mistake."

Surprisingly, Officer Radley told her that he hoped she was right. "Tell you the truth, nobody knows what to do with him. Between how scared he is and the fact he's dumb and all, we can't get no answers outta him. Even if he did do what they say, he'll probably get off on account of he's, y'know, not all there to begin with."

"So can I see him?" Colleen persisted.

Radley just shrugged. "I guess. Guilty or not, doubt he'll be getting many visitors. One won't make a difference."

Colleen was led downstairs to the holding cells. Springwood wasn't large, so there were only three. Officer Radley pointed toward the last cell, where Denny lay curled up in a ball on a cot. Seeing him like that almost made Colleen cry, but she held back. Officer Radley rapped gently on the bars with a nightstick to roust Denny.

"You got a visitor, sport. Up and at 'em!"

Denny peered out from the bed suspiciously. When he saw Colleen, he sat up immediately. His face was a turmoil of emotions.

Officer Radley took Colleen firmly by the shoulders and moved her backward so she stood against the wall facing the cell. He then pointed down to a yellow line in the floor.

"Stay behind this line at all times," he instructed. "That way, the prisoner can't reach you." The distance from the line to the bars of the cell was about five feet.

"Denny won't hurt me."

"Stay behind this line at all times," Officer Radley repeated. "If you want, I'll stay here and supervise."

Colleen understood that he expected her to follow the rules, and decided he was being fair. But she didn't want him listening in on them. "You don't have to worry." She flashed him an earnest smile, trying to communicate her willingness to cooperate. It worked.

"I'll be back for you in five minutes," he told her, and left.

After she was certain Officer Radley was truly gone, Colleen's first impulse was to run up to Denny's bars. She stopped herself. Radley might still be watching. For all she knew, there could be a video camera, or a

microphone. No such device was evident, but Colleen realized there was nothing she could do about it anyway. She just had to forge ahead.

"Hi," she began, aware that she sounded inane. "I'm sorry about what happened."

Denny remained seated on the cot. Staring down at his shoes, he did not acknowledge Colleen's words.

"I know about the pictures." Colleen thought she saw a tremor in Denny's hand. "But I think I understand," she said quickly. No movement now. No acknowledgment. "I want to help you." Still Denny did not move. "Do you understand? I want to help you."

Finally Denny looked up. And Colleen saw he had been focusing on the ground in front of him to try to maintain control of himself. His face twitched once more with turbulent, inexpressible thoughts. Colleen continued.

"I don't think you have anything to do with what's happened. But you have to tell me, however you can, that you didn't do it. If you tell me, I'll believe you."

Denny's hands gripped the mattress on which he sat. Veins bulged in his sinewy arms.

"Tell me. Tell me and I'll believe you." She spoke the next words slowly and clearly: "Do you know anything about what happened to Tish or Melina?"

Denny looked at her then. His big eyes bored into her. He was sweating profusely, and Colleen noticed he was shaking. Then, slowly, he moved his head. Up and down. Denny was nodding in answer to her question. His response took her completely by surprise.

"Omigod…" Colleen gasped, and unconsciously backed up against the wall.

Without warning, Denny flew at the cell bars. Slamming his shoulders against them, he thrust his arms through. His fingers took the shape of talons as he clawed the air. Overextending his arms, he was only inches away from Colleen. All the while, he made unintelligible, guttural noises.

Suddenly Officer Radley came running toward her. His billy club in hand, he struck at Denny's arms. Denny howled like a wounded animal and fell back onto the floor in front of the cot. Taking Colleen gently by the shoulders once more, Radley escorted her out of the cellblock.

"Whoa," he said, whistling through his teeth. "That's why we got video cameras in this place." When they got back upstairs, he asked if she was all right.

"Yeah, I'm okay," she said, barely able to speak. Officer Radley gave her a soft drink, and even offered to drive her home. Colleen politely declined the ride. She wanted to get home, but arriving by police cruiser would surely upset her parents. And she didn't want to have to explain how she had ended up there instead of Mrs. Wodell's house. Thanking Officer Radley for his help, Colleen left. For a moment, she thought of going to Mrs. Wodell's. It seemed forever since she had seen Lance. But he would have to wait.

* * *

Once home, Colleen went quickly to her room and prepared for bed. Sleep was elusive at first, but finally came after reading distracted her from a million racing thoughts.

In her dreams, Colleen relived the scene at the police station. Only this time, the bars were made of painted Styrofoam instead of hardened steel. When Denny lunged, he smashed through them easily, and in seconds, he was upon her. And this time, Officer Radley did not come to her rescue.

Chapter 16

The next day, school had returned to normal — only to turn inside out again after history class.

Class itself began with Mr. Klusky announcing that he was extending the due date for the historical-figure reports by a week. Kirk wanted to compare notes about what they had seen in Denny's office, but Colleen told him they would have to talk later. She hadn't thought the subject all the way through yet. Nor did she mention her encounter with Denny from the night before.

Then Colleen caught a glimpse of Vicki. In her chair, several rows back, Vicki stared sinisterly at Colleen. Even after she turned around again, Colleen could still feel eyes boring into the back of her head. Vicki drummed her fingers on the top of her desk. Though the noise eluded Mr. Klusky at the very front of the room, to Colleen each little click sounded like a gunshot. Vicki had it out for her something fierce today. Colleen could feel it. She spent the rest of the period trying to figure out how to get out of the room before Vicki. No solutions presented themselves. When the bell finally rang, Vicki winked at Colleen and practically ran out into the hallway to wait.

While Colleen pondered what to do, Kirk's voice came from beside her. "Tell Mr. Klusky." Apparently he had been watching and knew the score.

"No, it's all right," she told him, far from sure. Steeling herself, she got up and walked toward the door. Sure enough, Vicki was waiting for her in the hallway. She started in on Colleen immediately.

"Told ya that guy was a *freak"* she sneered. "How do you feel about *that freak* now?" She practically spat each time she said the word *freak.*

"I know you're upset, Vicki," Colleen said quietly. "And I'm sorry about your friends, but…"

"Friends?" Vicki cut in. "What do you know about friends? You think that murdering *freak* is your friend?"

Vicki was trying hard to rile Colleen. And it was working. Colleen's voice rose a notch. She was aware yet another crowd was gathering. Why

not? she thought dryly. These confrontations had become an almost daily event. Even Mr. Klusky had become a devoted spectator.

"Yes, Denny is a friend. No matter what anyone thinks, he is not a murderer." Tightly coiled anger started to unwind deep inside Colleen. "And if you weren't so upset, even *you* would realize that."

"I wonder what your college boyfriend would think if he knew his girl had a thing for a *freak."*

Colleen didn't even want to dignify that with a response. Instead, she just shook her head disgustedly and tried to push past Vicki.

"Hey, I'm not done with you, Colleeny-Weenie," said Vicki, blocking her path.

So Colleen turned around and started walking the other way.

"I said," Vicki breathed as she wrapped her hands around Colleen's neck, "I'm not done with you." Colleen froze. The hallway became preternaturally silent. Vicki started tightening her grip around Colleen's throat. "How does it feel?" she hissed. "You think it felt this way for Melina? What about Tish?"

An adult voice rang out in the hallway. Mr. Klusky. "Vicki Stratton, you…"

But he didn't get to finish as Colleen instinctively elbowed Vicki in the stomach. Vicki doubled over, all the air escaping her lungs with a whoosh through her mouth. Spinning quickly, Colleen grabbed the deflated girl by the shoulders and shoved her backward. She flew into the lockers with a loud bang. Vicki looked up, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"Now, Colleen…" Mr. Klusky half said, stunned by Colleen's actions. She ignored him.

"Look, I'm sorry if you're sad," she told Vicki. Her voice quivered only briefly. "Or mad, or whatever. But I'm not gonna let you take it out on me." Lowering her voice, she tried to make Vicki understand she meant business. "I'm not gonna let you take anything out on me anymore."

By now the shock had worn off and Vicki started to straighten up. As Colleen turned away, she saw the evil grin reappear on the other girl's face. Its power, however, had faded. Still, Vicki got in a parting shot.

"You think you know about people and friends," Vicki called out across the hallway. "But I know a few things myself." Her voice was fading as Colleen hurried away, but she heard Vicki's final remark quite clearly: "For one, you have fewer friends than you think."

Vicki's derisive laugh was the last thing Colleen heard before she turned a corner. Finally out of sight, she ran straight for the nearest girls' bathroom and went to a stall. Closing the door behind her, she slid the bolt, locking herself inside. All at once, the tension from her confrontation with Vicki surfaced. Covering her face with her hands, Colleen broke down into deep sobs. It was several minutes before she could stop. The bell for the next class had rung long ago. She stayed in the stall, weeping intermittently, for the next fifteen minutes. No one else came into the bathroom during that time. By the time the bell rang for the next period, Colleen had calmed down enough to face her next class.

* * *

By the end of the day, Vicki had still not reappeared to wreak her revenge, as Colleen had feared. Of course, there was no telling where Vicki might be lurking. Regardless of how things had gone earlier, Colleen knew she couldn't stand a rematch so soon. Kirk had gone straight to the library after his last class, so he couldn't protect her. And Lance certainly couldn't do anything for her. He was off at college right now. Or at the library. Or at Mrs. Wodell's, for all she knew. Kirk had mentioned that Lance had moved into the librarian's house after Denny's arrest. Taken over Denny's room, even. Colleen cynically wondered if she'd ever see him again.

Shaking off the clouds that threatened to close in on her, Colleen hurriedly left school. Soon Colleen was able to forget about Vicki and think about Denny. She wanted to find some way to help him, but could come up with nothing. Soon convinced she couldn't solve this alone, Colleen tried calling Lance at Mrs. Wodell's.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she said. "I know you're busy."

"Yeah," he agreed, but seemed genuinely pleased to hear her voice. "But I got a minute. What's up?"

Colleen resisted the urge to tell him a detailed version of the day's events. "It's been… a day," she told him instead. "I'll tell you later. Can you take a break later? I need some help with something."

"Around nine or so, I think I can take off for a bit. What's the story?" It sounded as if he was washing dishes as he talked on the phone. "Is it something I should think about in the meantime?"

"Well, it's about Denny," she ventured.

"Oh," he replied grimly. Colleen could tell he felt terrible about the whole thing, too. "Fine. I'll pick you up." There was a loud, metallic clang on his end of the line. "I better go."

After saying good-bye, Colleen hung up. Better get Kirk in on this, she thought. At first she had thought just she and Lance could hash this out. They had spent little time alone together recently. But since Kirk had seen Denny's office, too, he might have some ideas. And she'd have him bring Ricky along. Sometimes he could be weird, but Ricky was basically a nice guy and sometimes, according to Kirk, came up with extremely creative solutions to problems. That kind of input might be just what they needed in a situation like this.

When Lance picked her up that night, Colleen refused to talk about the situation until they were all together. Lance betrayed some disappointment when he realized they weren't going to be alone. She asked about Mrs. Wodell, and his end of the conversation lasted them until they got to the Jaguar. Ricky and Kirk were already at a booth when she and Lance arrived.

"You should have seen this girl," Kirk gushed to Lance as they sat down. "She slam-dunked Vicki in the hallway at school this afternoon. It was amazing."

"Really?" Lance was impressed. Despite Colleen's objections, Kirk related the incident, embellishing it dramatically. When the story was over, Lance was left shaking his head. "Wow," was all he could say.

"That was probably pretty stupid of me," Colleen demurred. "I mean, things'll probably just get worse. But she made me so angry…"

"Good!" Kirk told her, slapping her chummily on the shoulder. "It's been bugging me, like, forever. Man! I loved it when you threw her up against the locker like that! There's a girl who's gonna think twice about bullying *anyone* now." He took a joyful sip of Coke. "I mean, she'll probably go back to bullying, but she's got the fear o' God in her now!"

Colleen just rolled her eyes. "I did not *throw* Vicki against the locker. Anyway, that's not why we're here. I wanna talk about Denny. I just don't believe he's a killer."

Lance's reply was very measured. "I liked Denny, too, Colleen. But I don't know…"

"So you think he did it?" Colleen demanded.

"Not necessarily," Lance said defensively. "I'm just saying that anything's possible. I heard about those pictures, about Tish's driver's license. You know he used to stare at girls. Everybody knows that."

"Maybe, but you look at girls, don't you?"

Lance took this as a sort of icebreaker. "I only have eyes for you, dear," he quipped, laughing. Colleen was far from amused.

"And what have you heard about these pictures?" she asked him.

"You're being grilled, buddy boy," Ricky piped up from across the table.

"I noticed," Lance replied, without a smile. But he answered Colleen's question. "Pictures of girls. Dirty stuff." He was clearly embarrassed.

"That's what you *heard*!" She turned to Kirk. "What did you find in Denny's office?" she asked him.

"Ah! The plot thickens!" Ricky snickered. Colleen silenced him with a glance.

"Pictures of girls," Kirk answered, getting into the game. "Lots of them. Not very exciting, though."

"Why was that?" Colleen briefly imagined herself as a powerful attorney questioning a witness. A somewhat different role for herself than that of Joan of Arc, but she liked it anyway.

"They were all like… you." Kirk blushed, but continued. "Pretty, young… like you'd find in soap commercials or something."

"And all the" — she turned back to Lance — *"dirty* stuff?"

"None," Kirk answered. "In fact, the only skin was a bare arm or leg. Maybe. Not even any swimsuit pictures."

"And your point would be…?" Lance asked impatiently.

Colleen realized she might be treating Lance a bit too harshly, so she softened her approach. "Look. You look at girls. You can get away with it, 'cause you're a good-looking guy." Lance smiled — until he realized she didn't mean it as a compliment. "Think about Denny. He's ugly."

"A monster, really," Ricky interjected.

Instead of snapping at him, Colleen nodded. "Right. So his appearance scares people. That doesn't mean he doesn't appreciate the way others look. Even if he could never actually talk to them because of the way people react to him. Haven't you ever thought how lonely he must be?"

Lance seemed to be trying to understand. "Well, of course. It would be terrible to have people cringing away from you all the time."

"Exactly!" Colleen pounded the table with a closed fist. "So you try to look at people — girls, let's say…"

"Let's!" exclaimed Ricky.

Ignoring him, Colleen went on. "A lot of the time, no one notices, but sometimes they do. They react. The rumors of staring get started. But you like it best when you can look, but not get a negative reaction. So…"

"Pictures!" Kirk nearly shouted. "He gets to look at the things that make him happy. And even better, they never turn away or stop smiling!"

For the first time in her life, Colleen raised her hand for a high five. Kirk was so surprised, he almost left her hanging. But he came through just in time.

"Okay, okay," Lance said. "So Denny collects pictures of girls — totally wholesome pictures, if what you say is true — like others collect pictures of butterflies or flowers." He scratched his head. "But what about the driver's license? That would indicate obsessive tendencies."

Ricky snorted. "Someone at this table is in Psych 101," he laughed. Lance started to say something, but Colleen stopped him.

"I know what you mean," she told Lance. "But just because he had it doesn't mean he stole it. He could have found it. And maybe he should have returned it, but…"

"You're reaching," Lance told her bluntly. Then, more gently, he asked, "But what's the point of all this, anyway? The pictures don't prove anything, really. Either way."

"I know," Colleen admitted. "That's the problem. But I think — I know — that Denny is innocent. And I think the police are assuming he did it because of the pictures and because of the rumors about Denny. And because it's just easier than considering anything else."

"What do you expect to do about it?"

"That's what I need you guys for. To help me figure that part out." Everyone else exchanged looks with each other, as if to say, *Who, me?* "Denny doesn't have anyone looking out for him. I think Mrs. Wodell would if she hadn't had the stroke. Since she can't, I guess I've convinced myself that it falls to me." Her most recent surge of power was now ebbing. "I was hoping you guys could help me figure out a way to help him, given what we know."

"But we don't *know* anything," Lance told her.

"He's right," Kirk agreed quietly. "I mean, what we said about the pictures makes sense. But so do other, less… ah… heartening possibilities."

"You're an ultrasweet girl," Ricky managed to say without sounding patronizing. "And as of today, pretty scary — in a *good* way. But I don't think there's anything we can do. Except what you're doing, and that's just trying to be supportive. Positive thoughts and all that."

Just when she thought she was drained, Colleen's anger flared and her energy surged. She stood up quickly. "That's the easy thing to do, too. Meanwhile, somebody innocent is in jail and some sicko is still out there. And no one's doing anything about it. Because it's easier not to!"

"Whoa, Colleen!" Lance was clearly alarmed. "Calm down."

She turned on him. "This isn't something I just think. It is an absolute truth that I know for certain. I don't know how, but I know." Tears began to stream down her face. "And I need your help to prove it." She began to say something else, then turned and fled the table.

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Minutes later, Lance found her waiting near the passenger door to his car.

"I think I'd better take you home," he said quietly. She agreed. Colleen broke the ensuing silence after a few blocks.

"I'm sorry," she told Lance.

"It's okay."

"It's just that I've been feeling so weird. Everything that's been going on. Lately I feel like I know the truth about so many things that I can't even say." She lowered her voice almost to a whisper. "And when I can say it, I can't prove it."

"Things have been crazy lately," Lance agreed. "I think your fight with Vicki showed things are coming to a head for you, somehow. Whatever… You sound like you could use some sleep."

Colleen fell silent again, lost in swirling thoughts.

"I'm gonna drive past Mrs. Wodell's house on the way to taking you home," he said more brightly. "Mrs. Gilliam from next door is there, but I just want to drive by and make sure the house hasn't burned down or anything."

They were three blocks away when they noticed the flashing police lights. One block away, they realized the police cars were parked in front of Mrs. Wodell's house. Lance stepped on the gas and zoomed up the street. Some of the flashing lights came from an ambulance. Lance's car screeched to a halt. Without speaking, he and Colleen leapt out of the car and ran up the front walk. A police officer stopped them.

"I'm Lance Mathews," he explained. "Mrs. Wodell's caretaker. What happened?"

The police officer studied Lance suspiciously for a moment, then jerked a thumb toward the front door. "That's what happened," he said.

Almost on cue, paramedics appeared, dragging a gurney through the front door. On it rested a figure covered by a white sheet. A dark red stain was spreading on the sheet. As the gurney bounced down the steps, a limp arm flopped out from underneath the sheet, and before a paramedic could tuck it back in, Colleen saw the smooth scar tissue.

Stifling a scream, she turned to Lance.

"Oh no!" Colleen cried. "Denny!"

Lance put his arm around Colleen and asked the policeman what had happened.

"About an hour ago," the officer explained, "the deceased escaped after pretending to have suffered an injury and overpowering the officer he lured into the cell. Apparently he came straight here. Officers arrived just as the deceased was attempting to strangle the old woman."

"Is she dead?" Lance became frantic. "What about Mrs. Gilliam? Is she all right? Jeez, I never should have left."

The police officer stopped Lance by putting a hand On his shoulder. "Except for the scare, they're okay. The janitor locked the neighbor in a closet and didn't hurt her. Mrs. Wodell's gonna be bruised, but we shot the guy before he could do much damage."

"How did you know he was here?" Colleen asked.

"Another anonymous tip. This time on 911. Got here just in time, too." The officer saw both Colleen and Lance were still distraught and tried to cheer them up. "Look at it this way," he said with a smile. "Looks like this ugly business is over with."

"What do you mean?" asked Colleen.

"We got the bad guy and you kids are safe."

Colleen still wouldn't believe it. "But why would he attack Mrs. Wodell?"

"Who knows? The guy wasn't exactly the great communicator. Maybe she knew something and he was afraid she'd tell when she got better." The police officer didn't seem too concerned with digging any deeper. "Chances are he was crazy anyway. So there it is." Colleen read the look on his face quite clearly: case closed. "Gotta go help wrap this thing up," he told them, and walked away.

Lance was still upset, too, but for different reasons. "I don't know what I'm going to say to Mrs. Gilliam."

"Whatever happened, Lance, it's not your fault. You couldn't have known. She'll understand."

"I still feel terrible." He looked shell-shocked.

"Me, too," Colleen said. "Do you want me to stay until the police leave? I'll just call my parents so they'll know what's going on."

"If you call your parents, they'll just come down here and get you," he said. "I'd better take you home."

They drove back to Colleen's house in silence, each lost in separate trains of thought. Lance was so distracted, he forgot to kiss her good night. Colleen was so distracted, she didn't notice.

Inside Colleen's house, her parents sat glued to the television. Mrs. Martini called her over and pointed to the set.

"We won't have to worry anymore, honey." Tears of relief sprang to her eyes as she hugged Colleen. Colleen weakly hugged back, then sat down to see what the news had to say.

She had to close her eyes when cameras caught a glimpse of Denny's body being loaded into an ambulance. In her commentary, the reporter used the word «monster» several times. She finished her story by pronouncing the end of a "reign of terror." After that, Colleen excused herself and went to her room for the night.

By morning, the newspapers and the entire town had declared the case closed on Denny. One news story even cited a police videotape that showed the janitor «confessing» to his crimes. The realization that this tape was most likely the video made the night she visited Denny depressed her even more. Looking back over the incident, Colleen didn't think Denny had confessed to anything at all. He had simply responded that he *knew* something about what was going on, not that he had killed anyone. But the

chance of anyone believing her at this point was almost nil. For whatever reason, Denny had escaped from jail and had, according to the police, tried to kill Mrs. Wodell. Again, Colleen was left without an explanation.

Chapter 17

Springwood had returned to normal by the next evening. Parents felt it was safe to let their children out of the house. The restaurants and coffee shops seemed to be busier than usual, as if customers were trying to make up for lost time. And since the weather was pleasant, couples again strolled Springwood Park — unaware that they were being stalked.

One such couple, who had become engaged only a month before, walked blissfully down the path enjoying the night air. They were in their own world, oblivious to the dark figure that followed them at a steady distance. A horn honked from somewhere outside the park, causing the couple to look back. They caught a glimpse of the person behind them, but thought nothing of it. Certain he had been seen, the figure took the next fork in the path and split away from the couple.

Damn, Ricky thought to himself. I didn't even get close. As soon as the couple was out of sight, and he was certain no one else could see him on the path, Ricky stepped into the shadow of a tree. His black clothes made him almost invisible.

At the moment, Ricky was out testing a theory that was central to his understanding of horror movies. The theory was simple: People really were as dumb as they seemed to be in the movies. To wit (Ricky loved that phrase): the most frequent complaint about horror movies was that the characters unnecessarily — and unrealistically — put themselves in great danger. Real people wouldn't be that dumb, «they» said. Ricky found this complaint to be invalid, and his «lurking» proved it.

He had often come to the park during the last several months and lurked. He would hide in a certain spot until a person or persons walked past, then he would follow them, gradually closing the distance and going in for "the kill" if possible. Of course, he never actually harmed anyone. Usually, if he did it right, they never even knew he had been there. But his point had been proven again and again: In real life, people just don't pay attention sometimes. They do, in fact, put themselves in great danger. If Ricky had actually been a crazed killer, in several instances he could have gotten away with murder.

Of course, that wasn't always the case. Tonight was an example. By random chance, the couple had seen him before he could «do» anything about it. And the other night, when he and Kirk had been stalking Lance and Colleen, Kirk had made too much noise. Cardinal rule of lurking, Ricky made a mental note to himself: It is only effective with one well-trained individual. Team lurking, especially when a novice lurker was involved, was not recommended. Kirk didn't know the first thing about lurking, always stepping on twigs and shaking bushes. It'd be a while before *he* would qualify as any kind of respectable psychotic killer.

Ricky, on the other hand, had well-honed skills that were a continuous source of pride. They came from a certainty of vision, willingness to take risks, and courage for follow-through. This last trait was also something Kirk lacked. Otherwise, he would have stuck to their plan. But he had chickened out, not letting Ricky plant one more tarot card on Colleen's locker. It would have been the coup de grace, Ricky thought. But Kirk considered it cruel. Ah, love will make you soft, Ricky thought to himself.

After the incident in the park the other night, Kirk had been desperate to find a way to win Colleen away from Lance. So Ricky had come up with the idea of taking them to Madame Xaviera. It had all been set up ahead of time. Ricky spent a lot of money there — he was very interested in the occult (for research purposes, of course) — and asked the fortune-teller for a little favor. For double her usual fee, she agreed. That part could not have gone better. Ricky had told her about Lance and Colleen, and so the buildup to the Lovers card was perfect. Adding the second Death card had been Ricky's idea. If Colleen bought the reading, which it appeared she had, the effect of the second Death card would be unsettling, to say the least. On Monday he had planned to plant a Lovers card on Colleen's desk. Of course, she would suspect Kirk, but he could truthfully deny that he had put it there. Meanwhile, Kirk would have made a deal with Vicki to step up the harassment. And since most of this would happen at school, who would be there to come to Colleen's defense? Kirk, of course. This would all serve to undermine Colleen's relationship with Lance, who wouldn't be around at the right times. And strengthen Kirk's position.

Ah! The simplicity! Ricky thought grandiosely. It was times like this that he knew he was going to make it. In the world. In Hollywood. Well, that *was* the world, wasn't it?

Things had gone better than planned. When Tish had disappeared, Ricky saw a golden opportunity to really get to Colleen, and substituted a Death card for the Lovers card. He neglected to tell Kirk of the change in plans. Of course, his friend had been furious, but Ricky ultimately calmed him down. Look, Ricky told him, your horror at the appearance of the card was genuine. Score one for Kirk. Kirk had a hard time buying it. He thought using the Death card was a bit too twisted.

Unfortunately, the deaths had continued. Even so, Ricky was ready to stick to the plan. At the diner last night, he could see the cracks forming in Colleen's relationship with Lance.

Movement in the distance broke Ricky out of his reverie. Back to the task at hand, he thought to himself. Far away, heading in his direction, was another apparently loving couple on a pleasant evening stroll. Ricky licked his lips. Couples were his favorite. Double bonus «kill» points. Of course, couples were easier to stalk than individuals, since they were distracted by each other. Reason enough not to be part of a couple, Ricky thought. And I'm not just saying that because I'm jealous, he added, rather defensively.

Behind him, a creature shuffled through the leaves.

Damn squirrels! he thought. Or rats, more likely. The couple was getting closer, but was still too far away to see him. He didn't want to be given away by some stupid woodland creature, so he kicked a bush behind him to scare the thing away. Leaves shuffled one last time. Then silence.

Now Ricky focused all his attention on the approaching couple. They were close now. As they passed — unaware he was only a few feet away — he heard them talking about the stars and how beautiful they were. Ricky suppressed the urge to gag. Now, there's a couple that deserve to be stalked, he thought. Not that I'm bitter or anything.

He waited another minute, until they were far enough away that they wouldn't see him step out of hiding. The time was now. I'm gonna get real close this time, he thought.

Just as he began to step onto the path, a strong hand clamped over Ricky's mouth. An arm wrapped around his waist, pinning his arms to his sides, and he was pulled violently back into the brush. A snap of a twig was the only indication of a struggle, which ended as Ricky went still a minute later. But the couple ahead on the path heard nothing. They were talking about the stars and thinking about each other.

Chapter 18

Ricky's body was found by a landscaper the next morning, floating in the small lake in the center of Springwood Park. This time, school was closed for the day. Colleen spent much of the day trying to reach Kirk, but could not get through. She figured his parents had taken the phone off the hook. When she spoke to Lance, he said his mother told him that Kirk was taking Ricky's death very hard. Colleen wanted to go to Kirk, but her parents wouldn't let her out of the house.

Staying indoors all day drove Colleen stir-crazy. Her mother tried to entertain her by enlisting her help with some baking, but that didn't last long. Homework was out of the question. Boredom finally overcame Colleen's depression and she switched on the television to watch something, anything. All day she had avoided the expected television updates on Ricky's murder. It didn't take long now for regular programming to be interrupted for a report.

Colleen was going to switch off the television, but morbid curiosity overcame her.

"… very tight-lipped about the whole case," one female reporter was saying. She was standing in front of the lake at Springwood Park. Apparently Ricky's body had been found just behind her. "The police have repeatedly refused all comment, a rare stance to take under such circumstances."

Colleen could only shake her head. This was so sad. Colleen knew she would never walk past that lake again without thinking of Ricky. They hadn't been close, but he'd been Kirk's best friend.

The reporter signed off, and the camera zoomed in on the surface of the lake for dramatic purposes. The screen filled with a shot of a clump of dead leaves, floating. As Ricky's dead body had floated in that same lake. But Colleen noticed another object, among the leaves. She only got a momentary glimpse before the shot was over with, but she knew instantly what it was.

Her heart froze in her chest.

Among the leaves was a Death tarot card.

Leaping from the couch, Colleen snatched the telephone from its cradle. First she dialed Kirk, but again, the line was busy. Then she dialed Lance at Mrs. Wodell's house.

"Lance, it's me," she breathed into the phone.

"Hey, what's…"

Colleen didn't let him finish. "It wasn't Denny. Somebody else is out here killing people."

Lance sighed impatiently. "Is this about Ricky?" he asked evenly.

"Of course! He had a Death card near his body. Like the ones that have been showing up on my locker. It's the same person."

"Death card? What are you talking about?"

"A tarot card. I've gotten two of them, once after Tish disappeared and once when Melina was murdered."

"You never told me this."

"I didn't want to bother you with it," she said in a small voice. "Besides, I told Kirk. I guess I thought he'd tell you. Anyway, I saw one on TV just now in the lake where they found Ricky. It means the killer is the same person who killed Melina. Since Denny's dead, it couldn't have been him."

"Look, Colleen." Lance was not trying to hide his displeasure. "I know you liked Denny, but what happened to the girls is pretty clear. He admitted it."

"No, he didn't. He told me he knew about it, but…"

"What? You knew this when we were talking the other night and you didn't mention it? C'mon, Colleen." Lance was angry now.

"I'm sorry. I don't do everything right. I don't have everything figured out. But I'm close. And I know that a killer is still out there."

"Well, duh," he said meanly. "But you're pretty obsessed about Denny. This is a weird town, in case you haven't noticed. People get killed around here all the time. By different killers. Denny was one of them, apparently. Now there's another, and hopefully the cops will get this guy, too."

In the past, Colleen would have burst into tears over his response. Not this time. "The point isn't even that Denny didn't do it. The point is that someone else did."

"Okay, whatever," Lance said disinterestedly. "Join the police force, then. Tell 'em what they're doing wrong."

Colleen was on the verge of yelling at Lance. He was being so close-minded. "I gotta go," she said instead.

"I do, too," he replied huffily. They both hung up at the same time.

Now Colleen was angry on top of being stir-crazy. She had to get out of the house and talk to someone who'd listen to her. Kirk would. She knew he would. And maybe the chance to get his friend's killer was just what he needed at the moment. After getting another busy signal, Colleen decided on another tack.

She asked her mother if she could use the car. When Mrs. Martini refused, Colleen told her it was so she could see Kirk. For good measure, she said she had talked to him and he had asked her to come over. Finally Mrs. Martini relented and gave Colleen the car keys. Colleen was out the door in a flash, before her mother could change her mind.

Barely acknowledging stop signs, Colleen drove straight to Kirk's house. Mrs. Newman was reluctant to let her in when she arrived.

Colleen pleaded with her. "Your phone's been off the hook. And I've been worried about Kirk."

"I know, dear," Mrs. Newman told her. "We have been, too. Kirk just came from Ricky's parents' house, and he's very upset."

"Would you at least ask him if he can see me? I have to talk to him."

Mrs. Newman considered the request. "I'll tell him you're here." She turned toward the steps, then turned back around. "If he's asleep or too upset, I'll have to ask you to go. Please don't take it personally. It's just that this has been a trying day for Kirk."

"I understand," Colleen answered, and Mrs. Newman climbed the steps. A minute later, she came back down and motioned for Colleen to go up.

She found Kirk in his room, sitting at his computer playing solitaire.

"Hey," she said softly as she entered. "How are you?"

"You tell me," he answered, swiveling around in his chair. "Now I know what it means when someone says 'You look like you lost your best friend'," he said humorlessly. " 'Cause it happened to me."

"I'm sorry, Kirk. Really." She pulled up a chair next to him and sat down. He looked like a sad, pudgy little boy. Maybe it was pity, maybe it was the fact that she had fought with Lance, but Colleen was wondering why she kept rejecting Kirk. "How are his parents?" she asked him.

"Basket cases. And I don't blame them." He sounded monumentally weary.

"I came to see how you were," Colleen began. The tone of her voice made Kirk look up quizzically. "But I also had to tell you something. You up for it? It's about Ricky."

Kirk furrowed his brow defensively, bracing himself for something unpleasant. "What about him?"

"I was watching the news today. There was a tarot card floating in the lake at the park. A Death card." Kirk said nothing in response, but turned away. "I know. Weird. I want to go to the police, but I don't know what to tell them. I think that links Tish's disappearance with Melina's and Ricky's deaths. But there's more to it than that; I can feel it."

"The cards aren't related, Colleen," Kirk told her carefully.

"They've gotta be. Why else would they show up after every death?" She didn't let him answer. "Of course, not after Denny's, but that was probably to make me think he actually was the killer."

"The cards aren't related," Kirk repeated, more strongly.

"But why me?" Colleen asked out loud, ignoring Kirk's statement. "Why would anyone want to link me with this? Unless it was because I was friends with Denny." Suddenly frightened, she turned to Kirk. "It never occurred to me. Someone might be coming after me!"

Kirk shook his head slowly. A tear ran down his cheek from one eye. "No, Colleen. You have nothing to do with it. The cards are bogus." He swallowed hard. "The card near Ricky probably fell out of his pocket… when he was killed."

With dawning horror, Colleen glimpsed Kirk's meaning. Then he launched into an explanation — frequently breaking down into tears — of Ricky's plan. And his desire to win her from Lance. By the end, Colleen was stunned.

"I'm sorry, Colleen. If you never spoke to me again, I'd understand." He started to reach out to her, but stopped himself. "Ricky was so into it — I know that's no excuse. And you mean so much to me." He hung his head. "I don't know if you've ever been in the situation where you'd do anything for someone. Even stupid things."

Colleen stood. Silently she left Kirk sitting, hopeless, in front of his computer.

Chapter 19

As Colleen drove away from Kirk's house, Vicki pulled into the driveway at Mrs. Wodell's house. Actually, she had arrived a half hour before, but a police car had been in the driveway. So she had parked down the street and watched. Finally the front door opened and two police officers exited, got in their car, and drove away. Now, checking herself in the rearview mirror — her new look, but hot all the same — she made her move.

The doorbell played a quaint melody when she pressed the button, minutes after the police left. After a few seconds, the door opened. Vicki gave Lance a bright smile. Lance did a double take.

"Vicki?" he asked, surprise giving way to suspicion. The face was recognizable, but the rest was not. Instead of her usual spiked hair, Vicki wore it combed out. Cotton replaced leather as the predominant fabric of her clothing. Gone were the studded biker boots. Soft loafers adorned her feet instead. The only remnants of Vicki's former style were the four empty holes in each earlobe. Now only one set of earrings dangled there. The overall effect was stunningly different — and not at all unattractive.

"Yes, it's me," Vicki responded cheerfully, after giving him ample time to take in all her details. But he still didn't invite her in.

"What are you doing here?" Lance's voice hardened a little. He smelled a rat somewhere behind Vicki's delicate perfume.

"I borrowed most of this stuff," Vicki admitted in a calculated fashion she hoped wasn't obvious. "I'm trying new things. All this murder business and fighting has gotten me thinking."

"Uh-huh?" Lance grunted, folding his arms in front of his chest.

Vicki was aware she was going to have to try harder. But not too hard, of course. That would give it away. "I've wanted to make peace with Colleen, but she won't talk to me. Can't say that I blame her, but I'm trying. Or at least I would, but school was out today, y'know."

"Yeah."

Beyond the monosyllable, Vicki thought she detected a tremor of belief. So she buckled. "Look, this was stupid. I'm sorry. 'Bye." Turning abruptly, she marched back down the front walk. For effect, she clenched

and unclenched her hands at her sides and made just enough noise so that Lance would think she was arguing with herself. Then she heard it.

"Wait!" Lance called from the front door.

Vicki turned and saw him standing on the welcome mat. It wasn't running down the walk to stop her, but it would do.

"Come on back," he called. After a pause, she walked slowly back up the walk. "What's going on?" he asked. He was smiling good-naturedly. Now the suspicion was merely a tremor. Soon it would be stilled.

Vicki took a deep breath. "I just came to ask you to talk to Colleen for me. Tell her I'm sorry. I don't know if being friends is possible, but I'll take what I can get." Then, with a nervous laugh, she added, "I'm a little short on friends these days."

Lance was evidently taken by her request. "Of course I'll tell her," he said. Then his expression became mildly suspicious again. "You want to come in? I was just making tea for Mrs. Wodell. I mean, I'd offer you a soda or something, but there isn't any."

"Oh, I don't think that would be a good idea," Vicki told him. "Mrs. Wodell and I aren't that close, you know."

Lance laughed at her apparent self-consciousness. "No offense, but I bet she won't even recognize you like this. But we can stay in the living room if you want."

"Okay, I guess. If you're sure."

"Sure I'm sure," he said brightly. "C'mon in."

Soon they were sitting in Mrs. Wodell's painstakingly neat living room, having tea.

"A police car passed me as I drove up. Were they here?" she asked casually.

"Yeah," he said. "Wanna hear something strange?" Vicki shrugged, why not? "The other night, when they caught Denny here, it was because of a phone tip."

"A neighbor?"

"That's what they thought. But the 911 log says that the call came from this house."

"There was a woman here that night, right?"

"Yeah, but she didn't make the call, or so she says. And besides…" Lance leaned forward, getting into the story. "Now, here's the weird part: The call came in long before Denny broke into the house. Otherwise, the

police would never have made it in time. It's like someone knew that he was going to come here."

"Maybe the phone log is wrong."

Lance leaned back, thinking. "That must be it. But none of the neighbors will admit they called." He took a sip of his tea. "Probably don't want the hassles."

"Yeah. That must be it."

"Of course," Lance agreed. "I mean, how could anyone know where Denny was going to go?"

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Gravel ricocheted off the underside of the car as Colleen pulled into the parking area. Blue and red neon illuminated the night, **fortunes told**. This time, Colleen sincerely hoped so.

The Indian woman's eyes flared wider than before when Colleen walked into the front room.

"I need to see Madame Xaviera," Colleen told her. With a sniff, the woman stood and went through the beaded curtain. A moment later, she parted the beads once more and motioned for Colleen to step through.

Madame Xaviera sat in her high-backed chair. Smiling, she waved Colleen forward, seating her in the chair to her right. The Indian woman left them alone.

"I've been expecting you," the fortune-teller intoned creepily.

"You… you have?" Colleen asked in wonder.

"Of course!" said Madame Xaviera. Then her eyes twinkled. "I knew you'd be angry when you found out those boys had played a mean trick on you. With me, as well as them. I'm not a mean woman, you know."

"Oh, that," Colleen said when she realized what Madame Xaviera was talking about. "I know you're not a mean woman. I wouldn't be here if I thought you were."

Madame Xaviera was momentarily perplexed. "Then why have you come?" The theatricality crept back into her voice.

"Do you know what's been going on since we were here? The killings? Ricky, the boy who used to come here, he was murdered last night." Madame Xaviera bowed her head and nodded slightly. "I've been having

these… feelings. Everyone thinks a friend of mine, Denny, did this. I know he didn't. I don't know how I know, but I do. There's an answer right in front of me, but I can't reach it. I've been having these dreams." She stopped, her thoughts suddenly unfocused. "Anyway, despite what happened when we were here, I don't think you're a total fraud." Madame Xaviera rose up slightly at the mere suggestion. "And even if you were, I still think you might understand some of these things. I feel like I can talk to you."

Madame Xaviera's face was still as stone. Unreadable. Colleen knew she was going out on a limb, but at this point, she felt she had no choice. Lance didn't want to hear it. And she had gotten such a good feeling from Madame Xaviera before — until the very end, of course. But that was theatrics. And looking back, Colleen could tell the genuine moments from the false ones.

"I owe you one," the fortune-teller said to her, winking. "Now, give me your hands." Colleen rested her hands in Madame Xaviera's. Instantly the woman's eyebrows went up. "I see. You've been having dreams. The dark man I warned you about."

"Yes. It's Denny, but at the same time, not Denny. More like someone wearing a costume that makes him look that way." Colleen could swear she felt a mild electrical current running between them.

Madame Xaviera nodded, pleased with Colleen. "You have gifts, my child. They are in front of you, but just out of reach for now. When you master them, you will get your answers."

"What kind of gifts?" The thought intrigued Colleen.

"Powers. Of premonition. Intuition. Compassion," the fortune-teller told her. "Much like one of your former selves."

" 'Former selves'?" Colleen asked.

"Past lives. You were Joan of Arc in a past life. Burned as a witch because she had visions."

"I'm doing a report on her for my history class," Colleen said, amazed at the coincidence.

Madame Xaviera frowned. "Maybe I just picked that out of your brain, then." She winked slyly at Colleen. "Sometimes I read minds like that. But you never know. In any case, I bet your report will be the best in the class." Madame Xaviera became serious once more. "Unfortunately, I cannot tell you who the dark man is."

"Why not?" Colleen asked. She realized that's what she wanted from the psychic: a quick, easy answer.

"I'm sorry to say that evil pervades this world. This place even more than others," Madame Xaviera told her. "To point out a particular mote of evil here would be the same as trying to locate an individual drop of water in the ocean."

"Thank you anyway for talking with me," Colleen said as she stood and began to open her purse.

Madame Xaviera held up a hand. "I told you already. I owed you one."

Colleen accepted without argument, thanked the fortune-teller once more, and started back through the beaded curtain. But Madame Xaviera's voice stopped her before she left.

"Beware of the dark man, child. He is still out there, and you are very close to him."

Colleen nodded gravely. There was not a hint of melodrama in the fortune-teller's voice. She was being deadly serious.

Chapter 20

During the ride home, Colleen reflected on her encounter with Madame Xaviera. Despite the woman's dire warning as she left, Colleen felt much better. At last she had found someone who accepted her feelings as possibilities. And she had said that Colleen had powers that would bring her the answers. Colleen just hoped she would find the answers before someone else died.

Rethinking the situation, she still felt certain there was a pattern to all this. Now that the tarot cards had been eliminated, it must be something else. But what? First she eliminated Denny, who was obviously outside the pattern. He was older and had been killed by the police. The students' circumstances had been more mysterious.

That's when it hit her. They were all students. But not just students at Springwood High. They were all students in Mr. Klusky's history class: Tish in her class, Ricky and Melina in an earlier class. A connection danced in Colleen's mind, then spun away. She was stymied once more. All three had met their ends — or supposed end, in Tish's case — under vastly different circumstances. Another realization struck her: Ricky's death had not been fully explained by the police. Though his body was found in the lake, there had been no mention of drowning. Perhaps he was dead before he was put in the lake.

That was the key, she thought. Intuition. Somehow, Ricky's death was the key to the whole business. But how would she find out? If the police weren't talking to reporters, she could hardly call them up herself, ask, and expect an answer. Ricky's parents might know, but asking them was out of the question, regardless of the stakes. Ricky's parents. Kirk had seen them. He might know. The business with the tarot cards became instantly insignificant as Colleen realized she had to talk to Kirk. Without stopping to phone ahead, she drove straight to his house.

Luckily, Kirk himself answered the door. It was getting late and Colleen hadn't prepared a good explanation about why she had returned. At the sight of her, Kirk gaped.

"Can I come in?" she asked when he continued to stare like an idiot. "We need to talk." He hurriedly ushered her to his room.

"Look, I promise I won't…" he began pathetically. "Don't worry about it," she cut in. "I have to ask you a question. It's not a nice one, but I hope you know the answer."

"I don't deserve nice," he said resolutely. "So shoot."

"Do you know how Ricky died?" she asked quietly. "Did his parents tell you, or did you hear it while you were there?"

"Yeah," he said, shivering slightly. The room was not cold. "This is what they're trying to keep out of the papers. He bled to death."

Colleen's eyes widened in horror. She could never have guessed.

"I know. And, you're not gonna believe this, but for history, his report for Klusky was on Vlad Tepes."

"Vlad Tep-who?"

"Vlad Tepes. The real Transylvanian count who was the basis for the legend of Dracula." Another chill seemed to run down Kirk's spine. "Incredible for a guy who was so into horror and scary stuff, to go that way."

"No," Colleen said, almost inaudibly. "That's perfect." She felt faint.

"What are you talking about?" Kirk was alarmed by Colleen's appearance.

"We need to find out who Tish and Melina chose for their history reports." She began to pace the room frantically. "I wish it were tomorrow already. Do you know anyone in Klusky's earlier class?" She shook her head. "No, that doesn't matter; we can get a list for both his classes at the same time. But how? Can't just walk up to him and ask. He'll want to know why…" She stopped when Kirk suddenly stood and grasped her by the shoulders.

"What're you talking about?" he asked, concern bright in his face. "Why do you need a list of report subjects?"

"I have a hunch. But unless I have proof, you'll think I'm crazy. Like Lance already thinks." She forced herself to sit down.

"Look, I don't think you're crazy. If you need to know what reports people are doing, we can find out."

"How?"

Kirk sat in front of his computer. "Pull up your chair," he ordered.

She scooted over as he typed furiously at the keyboard. After a few seconds, she heard the sound of telephone touch tones. There came a click, then a high-pitched whining sound. Then nothing. Soon the computer asked

for a password, which he typed in. The screen blanked out for a moment, then returned with the greeting: **WELCOME TO THE SPRINGWOOD LIBRARY ON-LINE**.

"What's that?" Colleen asked, feeling a little dumb. Computer literacy was *not* one of her powers.

"We're in the library. It's the same system we use to check out books. I'm accessing the database remotely."

Colleen would have been impressed if she knew what the point of this was.

"You want to know about book reports. Well, we all know almost everyone in the class got their books at this library. So let's see what they've got checked out, huh?" As his fingers danced on the keyboard, Ricky's name appeared on the screen. Tapping the enter button made the screen go blank again. Then a list came up. Kirk pointed to the top lines. "See? *European Myths and Legends, From Transylvania to Hollywood.* A couple more. All books dealing with Vlad Tepes." He waved his hands at the lines toward the bottom of the screen. "And here's his history. If we keep going down, we can find the name of every book he's taken out since the system was put in." Suddenly he realized he was talking about his friend, who had died violently the night before. He suddenly seemed about to drown in melancholy.

Colleen pushed her chair closer to his, as much to keep him on track as to look at the screen. "Try Tish. What books did she check out?"

Kirk silently entered Tish's name into the computer. Her list replaced Ricky's on screen. "Amelia Earhart," he said dully.

Colleen knew she was almost there. "Of course. Do you see what I see?" Kirk's look clearly said he didn't. "Amelia Earhart disappeared. So did Tish. Ricky bled to death. His report was on the guy who was the basis for Dracula."

Now that he could see it, Kirk didn't want to believe. "That's impossible."

"Melina," Colleen ordered. "Try Melina."

After another few seconds, Kirk came back with the name Isadora Duncan. Both had heard the name, but neither knew exactly who she was. Or how she had died.

"I got an idea," Kirk said. "But I gotta log off first." He did so, and after the computer dialed, it was soon connected to yet another computer

system. "Almost all the on-line services have an electronic encyclopedia." He clicked his mouse a few times and apparently found what he was looking for. "Yeah, here it is. Isadora Duncan," he said slowly as he typed in her name. He sat back as it processed his entry. There were three beeps, which meant either the results of his search were onscreen, or the fries were ready at a fast-food place. "Isadora Duncan," Kirk repeated, reading from the screen. "Considered mother of modern dance. Blah blah blah. Here it is. Died in 1927 in Paris, when her scarf got caught in the workings of an automobile." He and Colleen turned to each other in amazement. "She was strangled."

Colleen's manic energy returned. "That does it. The murderer knows the report subject of his victim."

"That's insane!" Kirk exclaimed. When Colleen gave him a sharp look, he clarified himself. "I believe it, believe me, but it's incredible."

"We need to know two things. First off, who has access to this information? And what about the rest of the class?" She had begun pacing again. Kirk made no attempt to stop her; he was pretty hyped up himself.

"I'll log back into the library system." He spoke as he tapped at the keyboard. "But the access part is pretty easy. The only people who would know would be Mr. Klusky, since he has the assignment sheet, and us library employees."

"But that makes it harder," Colleen realized. "No one has a reason."

"How much reason do you need?" asked Kirk. "Someone's just flat-out crazy. Okay, I'm back in."

"Can you print out lists?" Colleen asked. "We may need them for evidence."

"Sure can," Kirk replied. "Hey, look! Peter Caldwell, the linebacker, is doing a report on Dwight Eisenhower. But after you get past the macho books, he's been taking out trashy romance novels! Definitely gonna need hard copy of that."

Although she was happy that Kirk's regular personality had returned, he was getting characteristically sidetracked. "Just get lists for anyone in our class, and the earlier class if you know anyone. I'd better call Lance," she said suddenly. Without asking, she picked up Kirk's phone. A harsh electronic sound greeted her ear.

"Hey!" Kirk cried. He tapped the keyboard in frustration. "It's locked up. We only have the one line."

"I didn't realize."

"Well, now I have to restart the computer. The way it works, the phone'll be locked up, too, until I get back into the terminal program." Kirk seemed annoyed with her ignorance. Then she realized that he was bothered about something else. "Why do you have to call Lance?" he said, betraying the source of his irritation.

"Because he's not in Klusky's class. Which means he may be immune to what's going on." She didn't like what she was going to say, but she knew it was the truth. "If something happens to us," she explained, "someone else has got to know what's going on."

Kirk saw that she was serious, and nodded.

"Why don't you get the lists together. I'm going over to Mrs. Wodell's and fill Lance in." Colleen shook her head. "He's gonna think I'm even crazier than before, but if you're on my side, and we have this proof, maybe…"

"Go see what you can do. I'll take care of things here."

"Thanks. I'll either call from there or come back later." Colleen gave Kirk a big hug. He didn't dwell on it too long, and got back to tapping names into the keyboard. She heard him snicker as she reached the door to his room. "What?" she asked, unable to resist.

"Vicki Stratton. Report on Marie Antoinette." He pointed a finger high in the air majestically. "Let them eat cake!"

Colleen smiled, then frowned. "Great. Print it."

Kirk gave her a thumbs-up as she left.

*** * ***

In her car, Colleen was secretly worried about Kirk. He was having too much fun with this. She suspected that he considered it a big game. And that could be dangerous.

At least one mystery was solved. Denny couldn't have been the killer. He could barely read, let alone use the computers or be able to plot a crime as bizarre as this. But that only gave rise to yet another mystery. How did Denny fit into this at all? She would have thought him just a victim of circumstance, but he had admitted to knowing something about the murders. And he was shot attempting to kill Mrs. Wodell.

Colleen could sense an answer dangling in front of her face again. But apparently she had still not mastered her powers well enough yet to grasp it.

* * *

Vicki Stratton stood in Mrs. Wodell's kitchen, rinsing teacups. Normally she abhorred such work, but it was all for a good cause. She was having an immensely enjoyable time with Lance. And more important, Lance seemed to be enjoying her company. If only Colleen would call or, better yet, show up unannounced. The shock of seeing her precious Lance with her archenemy would no doubt cause a deep rift between the two. But Vicki was patient. If not tonight, there was always the next night. Or the next.

A loud thump resounded from the bedroom. Lance must have dropped that big book he's reading the old bat, Vicki thought.

As she placed the last teacup in the dish drainer, Vicki heard quiet footsteps behind her. Lance, no doubt. Just for kicks, she pretended not to hear him. She wondered if he was going to kiss her. It wasn't essential to her plan, of course. But it would be a bonus. Knowing he was right behind her, she turned around quickly, smiling.

Vicki Stratton was still smiling as the blades of a large pair of gardening shears bit into her neck.

* * *

Not long after Colleen had left him, Kirk got bored with printing out listings of classmates. Besides, he thought, that would only really help after the fact. What they really needed was to find out who was doing this. So he decided to enter the suspects' names into the computer: Mr. Klusky and the library employees. He even checked on his cousin Lance. It wasn't long before he uncovered a killer. Tearing the listing from his printer, he ran for his car. He had to stop Colleen before something terrible happened. If he hurried, he might catch her.

* * *

Colleen knew something was wrong the moment she pulled into Mrs. Wodell's driveway. The house was entirely dark. Lance's car was missing. She would have pulled away, but noticed the front door was ajar. Against her better judgment, she left her car and pushed the front door all the way open. With little light from the street, the doorway became a gaping black maw. Reaching inside, she found a light switch. As she pushed it up, the little alcove just inside the house was immediately illuminated.

And directly in front of her, resting atop a vase that had once held dried flowers, the severed head of Vicki Stratton stared at her with dead eyes.

Chapter 21

Colleen doubled over in terror, a choked scream escaping her throat. Then, her thoughts racing faster than her comprehension, she staggered back to her car. Screeching out of the driveway, Colleen sped down the street. As she drove, it seemed Vicki's head floated just beyond the windshield. There was no way to block it. She finally gained enough control of herself to scream at the top of her lungs.

Still, her thoughts made no sense. What had happened to Vicki? And where were Lance and Mrs. Wodell? Colleen had gone no farther into the house, but somehow knew it had been empty. At least, devoid of anyone living. Lance's car was gone. Had he gone somewhere? Or…

A terrifying thought occurred to her. And her greatest fear was not that Lance was dead, but that he was alive. And had been the murderer all along.

The police, Colleen forced herself to think. I have to get to the police.

Finally seizing upon a course of action, she got her bearings and started driving toward the station. As she approached the Jaguar diner, headlights approached from the opposite direction. They swerved from side to side. At first she thought the driver was drunk. Then she recognized the car.

* * *

Kirk didn't care if he was speeding. They needed the police right now. And if it meant him leading them on a chase all the way to Mrs. Wodell's house, so be it. He'd make them understand once they got there. As he neared the business district, he was doing almost fifty miles an hour. The top to his convertible was down and the wind was strong. Luckily, the printouts were in the glove compartment.

A popping noise from the steering column interrupted his thoughts. Suddenly the car became hard to control. The steering became sluggish. The wheels turned left on their own. He jerked the wheel hard to the right, but overcompensated. He was heading for the curb. His foot let up on the

gas instinctively, but it was too late. The car was traveling much too fast, and he had no control.

* * *

Colleen watched helplessly as Kirk's car careened past. It hopped the curb and hit a fire hydrant on the fly. The car rolled several times, finally smashing violently into a telephone pole. There was no explosion. Just the sound of water gushing from the broken hydrant.

"Kirk!" Colleen screamed, and leaped out of her car. She was oblivious to the other cars screeching to a halt as she ran across the street. At Kirk's car, she stopped short. Her friend's face was bloody and bruised. His head seemed set at an unnatural angle to his body. Kirk was dead.

Dropping to her knees, Colleen started to sob. This was how James Dean had died, she thought bitterly. In a car accident. I knew what was going on and I wasn't able to stop it in time.

"I'm sorry, Kirk," she told him. His eyes stared off into space. If this were a movie, Colleen supposed she should reach over and close his eyelids. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Somehow, it would be an admission that she had failed. And she would not admit defeat. Not yet. Because she knew this wasn't over.

Right after, she noticed the papers spilling out of the glove compartment. The door had been broken open by the accident. Recognizing them as library database printouts, she ran to the other side of the car to examine them.

Sirens blared in the distance, coming nearer. The murmur of a crowd rose around her as others approached the site of the accident. But Colleen didn't hear any of it. She was busy scanning the reading lists. One set made her stop cold. It was two pages, and almost every book was devoted to violent crimes, serial killers, and similar morbid subjects. Except for one of the more recent books, a complete collection of Grimm's fairy tales. And the name above it: Clarise Wodell.

Tossing the papers back into the car, Colleen pushed her way through the gathering crowd and got back into her car.

It had been Mrs. Wodell all along. That had been the answer just out of reach. Now she had it. But Mrs. Wodell had Lance. And Colleen thought

she knew where. A fire engine, ambulance, and police car arrived as Colleen started her engine. One bystander pointed in Colleen's direction. She had been witnessed as being first on the scene. The authorities would want to talk to her.

There's no time for that now, Colleen thought as she put the car in gear and drove off.

* * *

As soon as she saw Lance's car in the library parking lot, Colleen suffered another crisis of faith. Her instincts had served her well, but again, she didn't know what she expected to accomplish. Even with surprise on her side, was she any match for a savage killer? It seemed absurd, but obviously Mrs. Wodell was not just a helpless old woman. Colleen remembered her tarot card reading. Madame Xaviera had said the upside-down queen on the card represented an evil man — or woman.

Finding herself walking toward the library's front doors, Colleen realized why she had come. This wasn't about beating Mrs. Wodell, at all. She had failed everyone else, but she would not fail Lance. And she realized that she really did love him. Regardless of what happened to her, she had to try and save him. Kirk's words came back to her. She would do anything for Lance. Even something stupid.

As she expected, the library door was unlocked. Bracing herself, she entered. The library was dimly lit, except for a bright spot just beyond the checkout counter. Calling out Lance's name tentatively, she walked toward the light. Soon she was standing at the top of the basement stairs. Down there, someone had turned on all the lights.

Obviously it was a trap.

Obviously Colleen had to go down there.

Taking the steps slowly, Colleen called out once more. As before, she got no reply. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, she looked out into the basement that stretched before her. It was the first time the basement had ever seemed brighter and less foreboding than the rest of the library. She walked toward the back of the basement, keeping close to the wall in case someone was lurking in the recesses of the book stacks. But no one leaped out at her. Just before the open space at the center of the basement, she

heard a groan. Lance's voice. Forgetting the danger, she ran forward and discovered him lying on the study table. His hand rubbed a bruise on his temple.

"Lance!" she cried, and threw herself over him. Frightened, he recoiled and tried to push her away. Colleen stepped back so he could see that it was her. "It's all right. It's just me. What happened?"

Slowly he sat up on the table. The motion made his head ache more and he brought his hand up again. He spoke haltingly. "I don't know… I was reading to Mrs. Wodell… I dropped the book. Someone hit me… I think." He finally started to notice his surroundings. "How did I get here?"

"I think Mrs. Wodell brought you. In your car."

"Impossible," he said, trying to shake off his feeling of disorientation. "She can't even speak, let alone walk or drive a car."

"It doesn't matter," Colleen told him, not wanting to argue. "But we should get out of here." He agreed and she helped him to his feet. He stood unsteadily for a moment. While he regained his balance, Colleen asked, "Was Vicki at the house tonight?"

At first he didn't seem to remember. "Yeah, she showed up out of the clear blue sky, all made up. Weird. What…"

"She's dead," Colleen told him, and wouldn't say more. Lance didn't ask.

Lance was still weak, so he threw his arm around her and she helped him toward the staircase. As they neared it, they smelled smoke. From the bottom of the stairs, they saw that the main room of the library had become too bright. And with an orange, flickering light. Leaving Lance in the basement, Colleen ran up the steps. Before she reached the top, she saw: The library had become an inferno. And between the old wooden shelves and the paper from the books, the fire was spreading quickly. She leaped up the last two steps to see if they had an escape path, when a figure suddenly appeared at the top of the steps.

"Peekaboo!" croaked Mrs. Wodell.

Colleen shrank instantly away. She could tell this was not Mrs. Wodell any more than the scarred man from her dreams was Denny. It was her body, but being used by some other force.

The thing masquerading as Mrs. Wodell shot out a gnarled hand in an attempt to seize Colleen. Though she missed, Colleen lost her balance and

fell backward. She tumbled down the steps, landing at Lance's feet. He immediately was at her side.

"Colleen? Are you all right?"

Her arm hurt, but she didn't have time to give Lance the answer. Mrs. Wodell had begun to descend the steps.

"Your turn, my dear," the thing laughed. It didn't even sound like Mrs. Wodell. "Time to die the martyr's death you picked for yourself." Flame seemed to dog the demon librarian's every step. It trailed after her like a hellish bridal train.

Hoisting Colleen to her feet, Lance dragged her away, toward the back of the library. Mrs. Wodell started laughing, a terrifying sound that made Colleen feel utter despair. As they were about to lose themselves among the stacks of books, Colleen felt compelled to turn back. Mrs. Wodell was at the bottom of the steps. Lance tried to drag Colleen away, but she wouldn't budge. She was transfixed.

When Mrs. Wodell got to the old card file, she lifted the entire cabinet. It burst into flames at her touch. As she smashed it to the floor, ancient file cards billowed out, each carrying a torch of flame. Soon the entire basement would be ablaze.

"Come on!" Lance shouted. Between Mrs. Wodell's maniacal laughter and the growing roar of flames, it was becoming hard to hear anything else. He started to push Colleen behind a bookshelf when they heard a great crack. Then a slow succession of explosive noises. The bookcase above them began to shake. Books began to fall from their shelves. Then the entire bookcase began to topple, raining books on their heads. This was a heavy mahogany bookshelf. If they stayed among the stacks, they'd be crushed.

Diving back into the main aisle, Lance and Colleen saw that Mrs. Wodell had pushed over the first bookcase, starting a domino effect. And in the meantime, she came even closer.

"It's the end of your story, Colleen," the thing taunted. "And you can't help yourself any more than you were able to help the others!"

"I got it," Lance said as they passed the study table area. "Come on." Pulling her by her uninjured arm, he dragged her to the very back of the basement, underneath one of the small windows leading outside. He pointed down the aisle. A ladder, used to get books on upper shelves, leaned against a bookcase. "Grab that," he ordered. She did as she was told.

"You're not going to make it," chanted Mrs. Wodell. "Not going to make it. You can't escape your destiny, Colleen. You know that. You've dreamed that!" It started laughing again.

"Why doesn't she just kill us?" Colleen wondered desperately. The sound of the thing's laughter made her feel utterly helpless.

"I'm in no hurry, dear," the thing chortled. "The fire will do my work for me."

"Don't listen to her," Lance shouted. "Now, get up that ladder." He pointed up toward the window near the ceiling.

"No, you go first," Colleen told him suddenly.

"What are you talking about? Get up there! I'll hold her off."

"No. You have to go first." She tried to push him. He wouldn't budge. "Listen, you're stronger than me. And besides, my arm is hurt. If I go first and something happens, I won't be able to pull you up. But you can save both of us!"

Lance hesitated another minute. "Get right behind me," he said, and started up the ladder. But Colleen could only make it to the first step before she had to stop while he wrestled with the window. It was stuck.

"Now, that's a good martyr," the Mrs. Wodell thing said. "Sacrifice. Face your destiny. Your death will be a memorable one."

Lance finally got the window opened and squirmed out. Colleen had no choice but to turn her back on the creature as she scrambled up the ladder. She was halfway through the window when Mrs. Wodell grabbed her by the foot.

"She's got me!" Colleen cried. Lance grabbed her underneath her shoulders as Colleen kicked out. But Mrs. Wodell only tightened her grip.

"Come now," the creature hissed. "Time to die."

Colleen felt as though she would be torn apart. Mrs. Wodell reached for her other foot, but Colleen drew it back. Then, taking aim, she kicked the woman squarely in the face. Her foot connected solidly. There was a crunching sound and Mrs. Wodell let go. Falling backward, she managed to take the ladder with her, and Colleen was left dangling in the air. Lance tried to pull her quickly through the window, but his strength was failing. He waited a fraction of a second. And by that time, Mrs. Wodell had wrapped her arms around Colleen's waist and was pulling her back down again.

"Your precious Lance is getting weak, Colleen." It spoke to Colleen like an intimate. "I may be able to pull him down with you. Then I'll have you both."

Colleen knew the thing was right. Lance was holding tight, but his strength was no match for the evil Mrs. Wodell. The flames and smoke were all around now. If they got pulled back in, they wouldn't last long, with or without Mrs. Wodell to dispatch them.

"Let go of me," she shouted to Lance. "Get away from here."

"No way," he shouted back. "I'm not giving up. And you can't give up either. Fight, Colleen. You know how to do that now, remember?"

Colleen wanted to argue. She wanted to point out the difference between defending oneself against a bully and fighting a demon like Mrs. Wodell. But she couldn't speak. The pain of nearly being torn apart was too great. Soon the roaring of the flames began to fade. So did reality. Colleen let blackness wash over her.

"That's right." Mrs. Wodell's voice seemed to come from close to her ear, whispering. "Let go. It's over now."

So Colleen let go. The blackness enveloped her completely. But she wasn't alone. Others milled about in the darkness. A sourceless light came up, revealing Tish, Melina, Ricky, and Kirk in a group. Even Denny was with them. They all looked at her with pleading eyes. It was Denny who spoke for them all, in a clear, deep voice:

"Give up on yourself, and you give up on all of us."

The light was extinguished an instant later. Colleen smelled smoke once more. And felt pain. And heard Lance calling her name. Instead of responding to him, she kicked out with all her might. Both feet connected solidly with Mrs. Wodell's stomach. Her grip loosened slightly and Colleen kicked out again. This time the librarian fell back.

Denny was right, she realized. If I give up, I give up for more than just myself. And Lance was right, too. A bully's a bully. This time Lance was able to pull her through the window before Mrs. Wodell could recover fully. While the librarian was still doubled over in pain, Colleen shoved with her feet, using the leverage to knock the heavy bookcase onto Mrs. Wodell. She looked up just as it hit her.

Lance pulled her onto the lawn of the library. Both of them lay still for a minute, breathing heavily. Smoke billowed from the windows of the

library's upper floors. Lights and sirens from an entire fire department company approached.

Colleen looked back into the basement. Mrs. Wodell lay pinned by the heavy bookcase. Only her face and right arm were visible. Whatever powers it had, it could not lift the bookcase to escape. And the flames were closing in. The screams rose in pitch. Mrs. Wodell's face became an almost unrecognizable mask of terror.

Unable to look away, Colleen watched as Mrs. Wodell's white hair finally caught fire. All at once, her entire body was consumed in an intense blaze, the hull of Mrs. Wodell burning away in an instant to reveal a form underneath. Still struggling, still screaming, the shape of a man now lay where the old woman had been only moments before. But this wasn't a normal man. His face was a mass of charred flesh, much more terrifying than Denny's. He stank of evil, and Colleen knew instantly that this was the true dark man who had plagued them all. And by the claw of his right hand, the way it slashed the air savagely, she knew the identity of the dark man.

Freddy Krueger. Legendary child killer of Springwood.

The heat in the basement had become so intense, Krueger's steel talons had begun to glow red-hot. Flaming books began to fall from the bookcase behind the demon, covering him like a swarm of deadly butterflies. Then the whole bookcase came crashing down on Krueger, becoming his funeral pyre. Colleen finally tore her eyes away. Lance sat beside her silently, in shock. And later, explanations to the police and fire officials were not easily made.

No body was found in the ruins of the library's basement.

Epilogue

Time to write "The end" for another tale of terror. That girl Colleen may have burned me up, but I still got plenty of recruits for Freddy's summer reading program. It's going to be a hot one, believe me.

And don't feel too bad for my latest batch of victims. They all got what they wanted beyond their wildest — heh heh heh — dreams. Kirk is now sitting at the wheel of his very own Porsche Spyder, the same kind of car his idol, James Dean, died in. At his side, the wind blowing through her spiked hair, is Vicki. She's more his speed than Colleen was, anyway. Don't you think? And in the backseat sits Ricky, bookended by Tish and Melina.

Who could ask for more than best friends, together for all time, cruising down the road in a fast car? And they lived happily ever afterlife. Right?

Right. Except for the concrete wall Kirk runs into while driving over 150 miles an hour. And just to make sure he gets it right, I let him do it over and over again. Forever. He and his friends have become eternal crashtest dummies! Heh heh heh…

Now it's back to my current book, the complete story of Jack the Ripper. It's been a long time since I've read a classic fairy tale with a happy ending. What's surprising is that some people were actually afraid of this Ripper character.

Between you and me, I consider him a hack.